

LOG HORIZON

A SUNDAY IN AKIBA

MAMARE TOUNO
ILLUSTRATION BY KAZUHIRO HARA

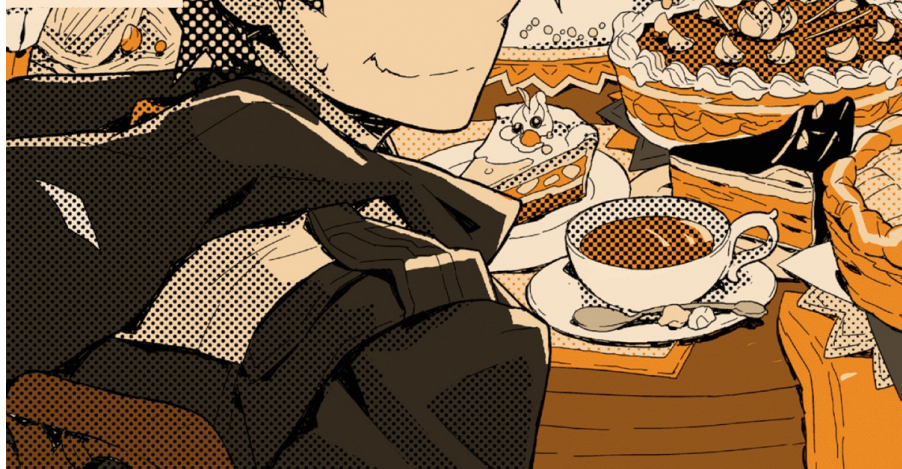




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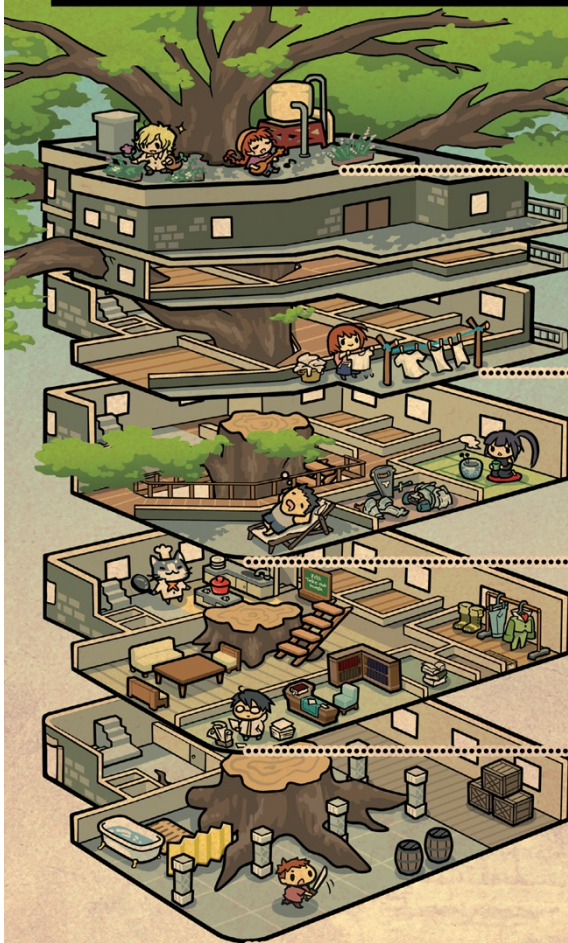
LOG HORIZON

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SECRETS OF THE LOG HORIZON HEADQUARTERS

Illustration: Mochichi Hashimoto



R

6F
5F
4F



3F



2F



1F



1F

1 BATH

A place to relax and soothe away the day's fatigue. Guys and girls bathe at different times. They're currently saving up guild funds to buy a traditional cypress-wood bathtub from the Marine Organization.

2 BATHROOM

Since this is a former commercial building, there are complete facilities on every floor. This is secretly popular because there's no need to wait for the bathroom in the mornings. Punishments are always "clean the bathrooms."

2F

3 SHIROE'S ROOM

Shiroe had a big room forced onto him because he's the guild master. However, since it doubles as an office, the extra space is being eroded by files and books.

4 NYANTAR'S ROOM

The sunniest room in the guild house. Serara often comes by to clean, but it's always spotless to begin with, so she tends to just bask in the sun before going home.

5 MINORI'S ROOM

A neat, simple room with the bare minimum of furnishings. Minoru and Isuzu are discussing getting more furnishings little by little. She's planning to start with wallpaper.

6 TOUYA'S ROOM

A room crammed with Touya's battle trophies. Minoru checks on it, so it's cleaned quite well for a boy's room.

7 KITCHEN

Nyanta's second castle. The lifeline of Log Horizon. The collection of seasonings he has purchased at the market is exceptional for a guild this size.

8 DINING ROOM

A neat, simple room with the bare minimum of furnishings. Minoru and Isuzu are discussing getting more furnishings little by little. She's planning to start with wallpaper.

9 WOODEN DECK

The tree provides shade from the sun, and a pleasant wind blows across the deck. People (mostly Naotsugu) often nap here on clear days. Sometimes there are drinking parties here, too.

3F

10 NAOTSUGU'S ROOM

A calm, rather Spartan room. Lots of battle trophies and important weapons and gear are lined up here. There is no panties collection.

11 AKATSUKI'S ROOM

A resolutely Japanese room, with tatami mats and a charcoal brazier. Akatsuki isn't wild about beds, so she sleeps on a futon. The room looks plain, but sometimes (out of maidenly consideration) she stealthily burns incense to perfume it.

12 ISUZU'S ROOM

Because she buys instruments later, the bed and the desk are about the only furniture in here. She performs exclusively outside (on the wooden deck or the roof).

13 RUDY'S ROOM

Aka the Rundel House...or the Dog House, as named by Isuzu. It's bursting with Adventurer-esque props purchased at the market. There's still room on his shelf of magic books.

4-5-6F

14 LAUNDRY

Though Adventurer equipment doesn't get dirty, artisan-made equipment and clothes are different. Laundry is a popular chore, so on sunny days, this place is filled with people doing laundry.

R

15 WATER TANK

It's terribly leaky at first, but the Roderick Trading Company refurbished it, and now it provides water to all floors. Water is supplied by a traveling Summoner's water spirit.

LOG HORIZON

A SUNDAY IN AKIBA

Adventure, you whose weight is borne by your wings and! The mystical world of Thailand is home to dragons and gods, magical forests, and adventures. Forget your usual literature for one yet unseen land that opens before you like a hidden gem. If it isn't your life,

MAMARE TOUNO

ILLUSTRATION BY **KAZUHIRO HARA**

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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Log Horizon, Volume 5
Mamare Touno
Illustration by Kazuhiro Hara

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LOG HORIZON, VOLUME 5

Sunday in Akiba

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CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

MINOR

SHE'S A VERY
SUNNY
RESPONSIBLE
GIRL AND
SHE ACTUALLY
LOOKS
ENERGETIC,
RICHIE'S
LITTLE
BROTHER,
TOUYA, A
MEMBER OF
LOO HORIZON.
SHE TRIES
TO EXHILATE
HER BROTHER,
SHIROE, AND
SPREADS HER
DAYS STUDYING
WISDOM
TO CATCH UP
TO HIM.



LOVELY ASSASSIN

ALTHOUGH
SHE FORMERLY
HID THE FACT
THAT SHE WAS
A BLUNT KILL
AFTER THE
CASE, SHE
SHE CHANGED
HER BODY TO
MATCH HER
REAL WORLD
SELF. SHE
IDOLIZES
SHIROE WHO
SAVED HER
AND CALLS
HIM HER LEGAL
AFFILIATE
WITH LOO
HORIZON.



AKATSUKI

SHIROE

AN
EX-CHARACTER
WHO HAS
ACTED AS
COUNSELLOR FOR
THE LEGENDARY
BAND OF
PLAYERS
KNOWN AS THE
OVERCLOCKERS.
HE WAS A PART
OF A PARTY
AND ACCIDENT
INTERACTING
WITH OTHER
PEOPLE BUT
AFTER THE
CATASTROPHE,
HE ESTABLISHED
HIS OWN GUILD,
LOO HORIZON.



ABLE ACCOUNTANT

SHE BELONGS TO
THE CRESCENT
MOON LEAGUE
AND HAS BEEN
ONE OF HER
BEST FRIENDS
SINCE THE
GUILD MASTER
MARELLE SINCE
THEIR DAYS AT
AN ALL-GIRLS
HIGH SCHOOL.
SHE'S TERRIBLY
FOND OF CUTE
GIRLS AND SHE
PRACTICALLY
ENJOYS PLAYING
WITH AKATSUKI
AS IF SHE WERE
A TOP



SLACKER PRINCESS

A DAUGHTER OF
THE PEOPLE
OF THE EARTH
GOVERN THE CITY
OF MANA.
SHE MAY LOOK
LIKE A PRINCESS
BUT SHE'S ALLO
A NATURAL-BORN
LAZYBONES WHO
THINKS EVEN
BATHS ARE TOO
MUCH WORK. HER
LADY-IN-WAITING,
ELISA, OFTEN
WOULD HELP HER
WITH HER INDOLGENCE.



CHARISMATIC BRESERKER

THE LEADER
OF G.O.O.
WAS A FORMER
COMBAT GUILD
ALTHOUGH
HE LOOKS
CALM AND
HE WAS A
REASON
FOR SHOWING
HIS TRUE
EXTREMELY
FEROCIOUS FACE
IN BATTLE.
HE ALSO
ACTS AS
CHAIRMAN
OF THE
COUNCIL.



PLOT

THE MASS OUTBREAK OF MONSTERS ALONG THE COAST DEVELOPED INTO AN ABNORMAL SITUATION BELIEVED TO AFFECT THE ENTIRE SERVER.

WHEN THIS DANGER BORE DOWN ON THE TOWN OF CHOUHAI, TOUYA AND THE REST OF THE NEWBIE TEAM STOOD UP TO SAVE IT. MEANWHILE, ALTHOUGH A CONFERENCE OF PEOPLE OF THE EARTH AND ADVENTURER LEADERS HAD BEEN UNABLE TO REACH A DECISION EVEN WHEN FACED WITH A CRISIS, IT WAS FINALLY ENDED BY THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH'S "SLACKER PRINCESS", RAYNESSE.

SHE WENT TO AKIBA HERSELF, ABANDONING HER PRIDE AND ASKING THE ADVENTURERS FOR HELP. HER SPEECH STIRRED MANY ADVENTURERS' HEARTS AND BECAME THE IMPETUS THAT WOULD GUIDE THE WAR TO VICTORY.

JUST THEN, SHIROE RECEIVED AN S.O.S. SAYING THAT RUNDLHAUS HAD FALLEN IN BATTLE, AS A PRISONER OF THE EARTH, RUNDLHAUS COULD NOT RESURRECT. JUST WHEN IT SEEMED THEY WOULD HAVE TO ACCEPT RUNDLHAUS'S DEATH, SHIROE USED A CERTAIN SPELL TO GIVE HIM NEW LIFE AS AN ADVENTURER.

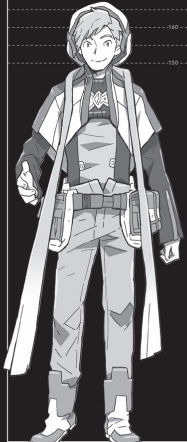


THIS LARGE-SCALE BATTLE DRAMATICALLY CHANGED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADVENTURERS AND PEOPLE OF THE EARTH AND THEY BEGAN LOOKING FOR A WAY TO COEXIST WITH ONE ANOTHER.

CHAPTER.



EVERYDAY LIFE OF SHIROE

▶ NAME: CALASIN	
▶ LEVEL: 90	
▶ RACE: HUMAN	
▶ CLASS: SUMMONER	
▶ HP: 7698	
▶ MP: 11866	
	▶ [ITEM 1] [GREAT EIGHT-FOURD BAKES] A WEAPON WITH A LONG HANDLE WHOSE TIP SPLITS INTO EIGHT BRANCHES. TENTATIVELY CLASSIFIED AS A STAFF. A RARE TREASURE. CLASS FROM FIRST INCURABLES. THE GOLD DROPPED BY DEFEATED MONSTERS. IT VISUALLY HANGS IN THE GUILD HALL AS DECORATION. 
	▶ [ITEM 2]: (LUCKY DRAGON HAT) PRODUCTION: CLASS DEFENDING GEAR MADE BY A TALOR. LOUNG HAPPINESS GUEST REWARDS. A RARE DROP ITEM FROM THE LUCKY WINGED DRAGON. IT BADGES ITS WEARER'S MOVEMENT SPEED AND EVASIVE CAPABILITIES. 
	▶ [ITEM 3] [MALYONAS SADDLEBAGS] MAGIC SADDLEBAGS GRANTED BY THE MITCH MALYONAS AS A REWARD IN THE LEVEL 80 QUEST "MALYONAS JET". BLACK HORSE. ALTHOUGH THEIR CAPACITY IS LARGER THAN THAT OF GADANNEY'S, MAGIC HAIL THEY DECREASE MOVEMENT SPEED, SO THEY'RE EQUIPPED FOR ORDINARY MOUNTS. 



<Salt>
The most important seasoning.
A natural mineral compound.

It is said that God created the world in a six-day miracle, and on the seventh day, he rested. In other words, even God takes days off. *And since God does it*, Shiroe thought, *humans would do well to imitate Him.*

After labor, there should be a holiday.

Without them, people break down.

That was simple common sense.

This might be another world, with Adventurers and the Catastrophe, but there was no need to destroy common sense. ...And yet.

Lately, Shiroe had been too busy to even raise such complaints.

He wasn't being picked on by his guild mates, of course. Nyanta, Naotsugu, Akatsuki, and even the new members—Minori, Touya, Isuzu, and Rundelhaus—were trying to help him. However, the Round Table Council sent down an even greater amount of work than that.

Well, it might be cowardly to put it that way.

Those jobs weren't being forced on him as the result of malicious power harassment.

...Probably.

If anything, Shiroe himself might have been the cause.

Shiroe was considered, both by the Round Table Council and by his own guild, to be a quick-witted strategic counselor type, and even he thought it probably wasn't an inappropriate label. However—and this was something Shiroe was deeply conscious of—it wasn't that he'd been blessed with extraordinary talent or the brain of a genius. On the contrary: According to Shiroe's analysis, his abilities were perfectly mediocre.

In Shiroe's own estimation, he was a typical advance prep type. He felt that his ability was to gather sufficient information ahead of time, examine and study it, include in his calculations how well it could be used off the cuff at the actual site, and then draw up scenarios.

This type wasn't unusual. Put roughly, everyone who read the

strategy guide before playing a game could be classed as this type of person. Really, it was a kind of cowardice. What set Shiroe apart was that reading the existing strategy guides wasn't enough for him, and he would then begin to write his own strategy guide. It was probably curiosity—strong enough to force the cowardice aside—that made him do it.

He had no confidence in his skills, so he prepared very carefully. As a result, the people around him came to rely on this, and before long, he would inevitably be immersed even further in his preparations. He was the type who, although not particularly obliging, found himself handed the role of organizer before he knew what was happening.

Being cowardly was generally considered a weak point, but in terms of Shiroe's role, it certainly couldn't be called a *total* weakness. When acting as a strategy counselor, caution bordering on paranoia was an advantage, not a flaw.

However, that was the sort of thing you could say only if you were in a position to direct plenty of manpower. Shiroe was on his own, and the reality was that he was being nearly crushed by work.

This other world held far too many things for Shiroe to research.

Where the future was concerned, the more information they had the better, and the information he wanted to collect covered a very wide range. *Elder Tales* had existed as a game for twenty years, and there was a vast amount of strategy information even among others of its genre. Now that it had transformed into another world, that amount had only ballooned to several dozen times the original size. Not only that, but the world wasn't static; it interacted with itself, and its aspect changed from moment to moment.

Of course, Shiroe had set a certain order of priority and was trying to make estimates as he investigated necessary information. He didn't personally have enough acquaintances or economic support to achieve his goals, but he was able to connect with the public flow of information from the Round Table Council and he had a budget, if a set one. Compared to how it had been just after the Catastrophe, he'd grown far more efficient at gathering information.

That said, even so, there were a vast number of things he wanted to know and things he should know, and his feeling of unease never lifted.

Shiroe wasn't collecting all the information about this world that he could get his hands on out of sheer personal curiosity. Whether the Adventurers worked to return home or gave up on it, the fact that they'd have to survive in this world was already common knowledge.

In order for that to happen, there were probably many situations

where information would prove to be a lifeline.

In addition, just as a ship on an ocean voyage needed a sea chart, the Round Table Council needed information about this new world. No matter the situation, if they didn't understand the surrounding information, they couldn't hope to make an accurate decision.

For that reason, gathering and analyzing information was a public duty for Shiroe.

However, for the eleven guild masters on the Round Table Council—Akiba's organization of self-government—routine contacts and miscellaneous duties took up a lot of time all by themselves. Just reading through the circular documents was quite a chore.

Major guilds such as D.D.D. and the Marine Organization probably had plenty of personnel who assisted their guild masters. Even within the guilds, sensible members had formed backup systems.

In a sense, this was just like having a private secretarial pool, and they supported the business processing abilities of Krusty, Michitaka, and the other guild masters. Even if they weren't actual secretaries, it was reassuring to have friends nearby who could be asked to glance over something and give you their opinion on it.

However, with Log Horizon's small membership—even though they'd added two more members to bring their total to eight—Shiroe couldn't hope for a member whose sole function was support of him and the business. Moreover, it was Shiroe who was best at office work anyway. Minori was probably second best. However, Minori was still in training. If Shiroe kept her busy helping him with clerical work all the time, she'd fall behind Touya, Rundelhaus, and Isuzu, so he couldn't ask for her assistance that often.

In consequence, Shiroe was being crushed by mountains of reports and miscellaneous paperwork.

“Arrrgh, I can't *do* this!”

Faced with a messy heap of correspondence, Shiroe groaned. Of course, that type of work was in his nature, and a large part of him was doing it because he wanted to, but that didn't mean he didn't get discouraged. In particular, not being able to go outside for long periods of time depressed him.

Shiroe gazed out the window.

Until just the other day, that “window” had been no more than a square hole in the wall, but now it had been fitted with a window frame fashioned from thin boards and a covering made of sailcloth.

It was afternoon, but unfortunately, it was raining outside.

The autumn rain beat down on Akiba. Softly, rain like thin silver threads moistened the concrete and struck every single leaf of the ancient trees that grew throughout the town.

It was a gentle, quiet, exquisitely beautiful sight.

Even when *Elder Tales* had been a game, the weather engine had created “weather” in the outside zones. It had been pretty compared to most other games, but in comparison with the shining silver drops that fell onto Akiba now, it really had been no more than a game.

At this point, it seemed to Shiroe that the sights in this world outshone those of real-life Japan in every sense of the word.

Evening showers in summer, thunderstorms with lightning and thunder that seemed to split the very air, light rain like autumn mist... Even though they were all rain, they were all distinct, and all were beautiful.

Shiroe had lived in Japan, where public transportation was advanced and multiple courier services made their presence felt, and the only signs of the season he'd been able to find had been on NHK news. To him, the weather in this world was like a perfect drama all by itself.

When he drew back the sailcloth just a bit, the air in town seemed to be blurred with endless white lines. It was the rain, falling without a break. Although it was October and not really cold yet, it was likely that autumn would slowly deepen after this. Here and there in the town, people were out walking, not minding the rain; he also saw Adventurers who were hard at work cleaning the buildings and structures they lived in, as if this had struck them as a good opportunity.

It had been two months since the Zantleaf Peninsula sweep, but dealing with the aftermath had taken more time than expected.

Or, rather, it might have been better to say that they'd passed the clean-up stage and were beginning to forge a new relationship with Eastal, the League of Free Cities, an alliance of People of the Earth.

The reports that were delivered to Shiroe also supported this idea. Mentions of skirmishes had grown less frequent, and those of business transactions and material transport had gradually increased. Now that they'd reached this stage, the rest was probably in the jurisdiction of the commercial guilds.

The Libra Festival, for which preparations were in full swing, was proof enough of that.

With that thought, Shiroe felt as though a burden had finally been lifted from his shoulders.

...Only one burden, however.

What was currently dragging down Shiroe's mood was the

situations coming in from all over. Up until now, he'd had his hands full with Akiba itself, and he'd intentionally ignored the outside problems, but he was fast becoming unable to keep his eyes averted. He'd traced his connections and listened to stories, put them in order, took steps and gathered information, and discovered that the situation had advanced dramatically. Or rather, it had gone too far.

Well, it isn't as if I didn't see it coming, but... To think it would turn out this way, of all things. Good grief, them and us... We're both...

Shiroe threw himself into a wicker chair and looked up at the ceiling.

Several maps, figures, and reports flickered through his mind.



On the Half-Gaia Project's half-sized reproduction of the Japanese Peninsula—here known as the Arc-Shaped Archipelago Yamato—there were five player towns. In addition to Akiba, where Shiroe and the others lived, these were Shibuya, Minami, Susukino, and Nakasu. Also known as the Five Great Cities, they had been places the Japanese *Elder Tales* players could call hometowns.

When *Elder Tales* had been an MMO game, because these cities had been connected by teleportation devices known as intercity portals, the distance between them hadn't really registered, but right now, that function had been suspended. As a result, moving between cities took the amount of time you'd expect, and in this world where monsters prowled, travel was risky. It was fair to say that exchange between the cities had dropped off dramatically.

It had been five months since the Catastrophe.

The town of Akiba, where Shiroe lived, had gone through great changes. Its appearance was the same as before, but the way people lived in it and related to one another had changed decisively. Add in the way they interacted with the League of Free Cities and the People of the Earth, and no one could say this was a game anymore. That was how far the situation had progressed.

Those five months had passed equally for everyone in this world.

As a result, Shiroe thought, it was only natural that all sorts of other places had changed, just as Akiba had.

However, Akiba's transformation had been influenced by Shiroe's will. He was aware that he'd made every effort in his attempts to change the town. In that case, were the changes to the other cities also being influenced by someone's will? When he thought about those wills, Shiroe felt something in the pit of his stomach grow heavier.

Shibuya had probably been the one that had seen the fewest changes.

In the first place, Shibuya had held a unique position among the five player towns.

The town of Shibuya had been created last, with the intent of spreading out the players that were concentrated in Akiba. As part of the dispersion project, Shibuya had focused heavily on the gates as an intercity transportation system, and now that the gates weren't working, the city's functions were nearly paralyzed.

As a result, most of the Adventurers who'd been based in Shibuya had merged with the town of Akiba. At present, Shibuya was used freely but infrequently; it was treated as a sort of summer-home district on the outskirts of Akiba.

In a way, the changes to Susukino had been just as Shiroe had foreseen. Susukino had never recovered from the deterioration of public order that had followed the Catastrophe. On the contrary, that deterioration had ended up transforming it into a lawless city. Over the past few months, almost all the Adventurers who had been in Susukino and wanted to leave it had made their escape.

At the time, Serara had been a brand new Adventurer, but she'd managed to hide herself and get away. Of course this was due to the rescue operation Shiroe's group had mounted, and since then, expedition teams organized by the Round Table Council had made several trips to Susukino and rescued everyone who wanted to get out.

However, although it had been thought that Susukino wouldn't survive as a player town, even now, it still held more than two hundred Adventurers. They hadn't been left behind. They'd voluntarily chosen to stay in that environment. Not only that, but there were a few Adventurers from Akiba and Minami who had deliberately moved there.

In this other world, this *Elder Tales* made real, there seemed to be a certain level of demand for lawlessness. He'd heard that Susukino had become a town where an Adventurer minority controlled the People of the Earth majority...

Shiroe didn't sense any malice in that. Actually, saying he didn't sense it would have been a lie, but there wasn't much of it. More than that, Shiroe was simply afraid.

He had called for human rights for the People of the Earth at the Round Table Council for two main reasons:

One was as a way for the Adventurers to survive. Here, the People of the Earth outnumbered them ten to one. People of the Earth made the foundations of most consumable items, the world's commodities. If they killed or dominated the People of the Earth, sooner or later, the friction would build and war would break out. No matter who won, it was sure to leave an enormous scar. Protecting the human rights of the People of the Earth was a way to protect their own rights. This wasn't Humanism or anything like it; it was a pragmatic calculation.

The other reason was fear.

Even now, Shiroe had a clear memory of the People of the Earth village where they'd stopped on their way back from Susukino. In that village, for the first time, Shiroe had sensed that the People of the Earth were human. He'd felt their warmth and backgrounds, their personalities and intentions, and he'd seen them as people for the first time.

To Shiroe, who'd received a standard modern-Japanese education, the idea of turning intelligent "others" into slaves was terrifying. It was such a taboo that it leapt over reasoning like justice and evil and

morals to link directly to fear. Of course the idea of becoming a slave was frightening as well, but the mere thought of having slaves and using them himself carried a visceral disgust.

The chill Shiroe felt from Susukino was rooted in the same thing.

However, there were only a few hundred Adventures in Susukino. If the scale was that small, there was still hope.

But this one...

Minami was...

...plunging into a situation that far surpassed what Shiroe had predicted, at a speed far greater than what he'd foreseen.

► 2

“Master Shi-ro-e!”

As Shiroe continued thinking absentmindedly, he was addressed by a lovely voice that sounded both reproving and somehow sympathetic.

“Pull yourself together, please. Are you eating properly? Sleeping? Hm. You seem to have been sitting there for hours again.”

“I am, and I am. And I went to the dining hall about two hours ago.”

Even as he delivered a mild retort, Shiroe stood and accepted a document box from Henrietta.

Adventurers had advanced physical abilities. In addition, since the foundation was a game, there was no difference in physical strength between men and women. On the contrary, as a weapon attack class, Henrietta the Bard was stronger than Shiroe, who was an Enchanter and magic attack class. She might even have *twice* his strength.

However, when he looked at Henrietta in her tight, secretary-style skirt and her bolero jacket with its corsage, he felt ashamed to make her carry a bulky box of files.

Shiroe set the box of documents on his work desk, then turned back.

“You didn’t have to bring them all the way over. If you’d sent me a telechat, I would have come to pick them up.”

“Yes, I’m sure you would have, Master Shiroe, but...I heard you’d been concentrating and pushing yourself for ages. I came to show my support for all your hard work, and...well...”

“If you’re looking for Akatsuki, she should be back soon.”

“Oh, my. Fu-fu-fu-fu... That wasn’t what I meant at all, but...”

Henrietta was blushing. Shiroe gave a little sigh.

Henrietta, the Crescent Moon League's brilliant accountant and holder of the purse strings, often came to visit Shiroe this way. Marielle, "Akiba's Sunflower," was the Crescent Moon League's guild leader, but Henrietta was the one in charge of its practical business. Her paperwork ability was particularly noteworthy. She was curious and inquisitive, and her contribution to the Round Table Council was probably greater than Shiroe's, who squandered the greater part of his administrative capacity.

"Let's see, these are—"

"—the Libra Festival," Henrietta pointed out, peeking in from the side at the documents Shiroe had picked up.

October. The air was chilly, and the season grew colder each time it rained, but Akiba's enthusiasm hadn't yet cooled. On the contrary, with the normalization of relations with Eastal, commercial trade had increased, and for many of the production guilds, business was better than it had ever been.

Foodstuffs, clothes and accessories, machinery, medicines, organic materials: All sorts of items were imported and exported at terrific speed. At present, Akiba was a processing and export town. Naturally, Adventurers were able to collect ingredients, ores, and other primary products, but it was easier to obtain them in greater quantity by purchasing them from the People of the Earth.

The People of the Earth, particularly the aristocrats and merchants, badly wanted the high-quality items the Adventurers made, and because they were keeping their eyes peeled in an attempt to somehow get their hands on their secrets, all sorts of lively business transactions were in progress.

As the production guilds grew more active, the ripple effect influenced the combat guilds. In particular, a huge number of quest requests had been issued by the Fairy Ring Investigation Project, which had begun the month before, and the number of parties heading out had visibly increased.

In the midst of this situation, the Libra Festival project had been brought up, seemingly out of nowhere. It was a festival event that had been demanded by the Adventurers living in Akiba, and the whole town was involved.

Even when this had been *Elder Tales*, users had held many unofficial events that the official side had had no hand in planning.

There had been lots of them, from small, banquet-like gatherings of a few people to enormous events that had pulled in whole towns or the server, but naturally no one had heard of such events being held

since the Catastrophe. They hadn't had the spare energy for it. However, now that five months had passed and a fairly stable local infrastructure was settling into place, there was demand for an event where everyone could make noise and forget their worries for a while. ...That was Shiroe's understanding, anyway.

Of course, Shiroe had been swamped with business over a range that extended far beyond event planning for a while, so he didn't know much about the Libra Festival. All he knew was what he'd picked up from briefly skimming the notices that were circulated among guild masters.

It was the town of Akiba's large commercial event, which would be held a few days from now. That was all he knew about it.

"How is the Liaison Committee?"

"Calasin is full of enthusiasm. My opinion of him has improved: He's running the event perfectly."

Henrietta's response came after she'd turned her back to Shiroe and begun organizing the files.

"I'd expect no less from an advertising agent."

The production guilds, and the Production Guild Liaison Committee, had taken charge of this festival project.

Ever since the establishment of the Round Table Council, a series of new discoveries and items had appeared, and these had brought great prosperity to the town of Akiba. At first, many topics related to the new items had been discussed by the Round Table Council, but this reached its limit before long. The Round Table Council was a place where decisions affecting the entire town of Akiba were made, and it couldn't spend all its time resolving commercial issues and balancing interests.

In addition, if the problems were practical issues involving items or distribution, they predicted that they would be able to resolve them without tying up the time of eleven guild masters, and had created a dedicated organization to do so.

This was the Production Guild Liaison Committee (PGLC).

The Liaison Committee had its offices in the guild center, two floors down from the Round Table Council on the very top floor, and it operated around the clock. That said, it seemed to be full of Adventurers who had nothing better to do, and the organization was frank and candid, rather than straitlaced. The atmosphere at the PGLC headquarters was that of a combined meeting room and workshop that was open to anyone.

In accordance with their policy of energizing the small and midsized guilds, the Liaison Committee office had become a sort of gathering spot for guilds that didn't have large guild halls. Michitaka

of the Marine Organization and Roderick of the Roderick Trading Company were positioned as advisers.

Recruitment ads, requests for business deals, and calls for information purchasing were posted on a big bulletin board, and there were business negotiations that dealt with finding partners in the sale of new items. It felt like a lively and noisy town assembly hall; since the Liaison Committee was only there to liaise, it didn't have the solemn atmosphere of the Round Table Council.

As it happened, the Production Guild Liaison Committee was acting as the host of the Libra Festival.

The Crescent Moon League—which had become one of the eleven guilds on the Round Table Council due to its importance, even though it was a smaller guild—probably had its own work to attend to. Lately, Henrietta seemed to have been doing more work for the PGLC than for the Round Table Council.

“Will the Crescent Moon League be appearing somewhere as well?”

“Yes, of course. Our young Blacksmiths will be selling short swords at the flea market. Then we're also bringing back Snack Shop Crescent Moon. Serara's working very enthusiastically on it, and besides, the new players never got to eat anything from it. Still, I suppose our grandest effort is probably the fashion show.”

“Fashion show?”

“Yes. Didn't you know?”

“Well, I'd heard it mentioned, but...”

Apparently, the Libra Festival had had its roots in an idea that had been brought up to the PGLC: “Couldn't we just hold a product fair?”

The first thing the Adventurers had wanted after their arrival in this other world had been decent food, but now that that had been settled, clothing and improvements for living environments were in high demand.

Back when this had been a game, residences had been no more than places to log out from. Furniture had been mere toys, used to decorate your personal space, and although there had been lots of variety as far as form was concerned, none of them had given the least thought to function.

Clothing had been the same. Among the companies that had participated in *Elder Tales*, Fushimi Online Entertainment (FOE) had been a developer with an established reputation for developing new (*otaku*-type, Japanese-style) graphics. Still, even if there had been an abundant variety of clothing and accessories, none of it had been everyday wear that emphasized function. At the time of the

Catastrophe, the “underwear” category hadn’t even existed on Adventurers’ item creation menus.

Lately, these inconveniences were also being gradually resolved. The items Adventurers created on a daily basis were richly imaginative and original, and their numbers increased by the day.

However, even the residents of Akiba tended to miss information on minor items. At present, the only way to learn information about products was to accidentally stumble onto them, or to rely on word-of-mouth or on the scant number of flyers that were handed out.

The proposal that had been made as a result had been to hold a product fair, but as debate followed debate, although the original plan had included a fashion show, an underwear exhibition and sale, a street stall village that exhibited food products, and model rooms with the latest facilities, the demand to exhibit various other products had grown.

Most guilds had at least one item that they could advertise as being their best offering, and they wanted all sorts of people to see them.

In that case, why not just hold a festival with such an exhibition as its center?! That idea had first been proposed two weeks ago.

This discussion had been conducted internally by the Production Guild Liaison Committee, but because roughly half of Akiba’s residents belonged to production guilds, the information raced through the town at terrific speed.

Since being affiliated with a production guild meant you were an exhibitor, simple visitors were in the minority at this festival. As a matter of fact, guests who came from outside might have been the only ones who fit the description.

In that sense, at this festival, the exhibitors doubled as guests, which meant it bore a marked resemblance to a school cultural festival.

Shiroe had been absorbed in collecting external information lately, using the eyes and ears of the Round Table Council. As a result, he didn’t know much about what was happening in Akiba itself. Of course, this “not knowing much” was measured by Shiroe’s own standards, and in fact, he knew more news than the majority of Akiba’s residents. In other words, Shiroe didn’t have enough information according to standards based in his strategist nature.

He knew what had triggered the proposal for this festival, and he understood that the festival was being held with the goals of economic promotion and the introduction of new products (or from the simple desire to have fun, using these things as an excuse).

He was aware that the festival was being hosted not by the Round

Table Council itself, but by the Liaison Committee, a subordinate organization, and that Calasin of Shopping District 8—who was quite reliable when placed in charge of this sort of event—was organizing it.

He'd thought there would be no need for him to meddle, and he had let the information pass without notice.

“Master Shiroe.”

“Yes?”

As Henrietta spoke to Shiroe, she was tidily stacking the documents and filing them.

“How is dear Isuzu doing?”

“Oh. Right. ...I thought I should go speak to you about it formally, but things got busy, and it slipped my mind. I'm sorry.”

“There's no need for that. You're too close to the Crescent Moon League for such things, Master Shiroe. It's only that Serara was worrying about whether she was getting along well.”

“Yes, she's doing just fine. She goes out hunting every day. She got sunburned this summer. With all the unused space we've got here, there's room to spare.”

They were talking about the young Bard Isuzu, who had transferred from the Crescent Moon League to Log Horizon. Isuzu, a girl with lots of freckles, had followed Rundelhaus to Log Horizon and had joined up herself.

Rundelhaus the Sorcerer and Isuzu the Bard. These two were Log Horizon's newest members, after Minori and Touya. Both guild masters had discussed the transfer, and it had gone smoothly. Like Minori, Isuzu was a newbie who'd been kept virtually imprisoned by the vicious guild Hamelin. She hadn't been a member of the Crescent Moon League for very long, and as a result, there hadn't been any particular issue with her transferring out.

In any case, the Crescent Moon League and Log Horizon were on very friendly terms with each other. They routinely interacted through newbie training and invitations to go hunting. Serara had been worried, but even Serara saw Henrietta every three days at least.

“You didn't go outside at all this summer, Master Shiroe.”

Henrietta spoke reprovingly. This was perfectly true, and Shiroe had no way to respond. Henrietta was a Crescent Moon League executive. Like Shiroe, she filled the position of “brain” within her guild. Since she also handled the Crescent Moon League's books as its treasurer, she couldn't possibly have much free time, and yet, from what Minori said, she sometimes looked in on the newbies' training, and she seemed to be working energetically. As a result, Henrietta's words made his ears burn a bit.

“...I know. I regret it.”

“Good. Here.”

The object she held out to him seemed to be a venue pamphlet. Scribes, Shiroe's subclass, could create copies of this sort of printed material from their item menus. The original had to be drawn by hand, but once it had been drawn, it wasn't at all difficult to make more of it.

He glanced over it. It looked as if all sorts of exhibits and events were being held in venues specially set up all around the town.

The majority had to do with clothing and accessories or food and drink, but there were more than a few that dealt with equipment, other iron products or wooden furniture. The festival began with an evening kick-off party the day after tomorrow and ran all through the first and second days until the finale.

A great dinner party and a wrap party, hm...?

Shiroe checked the dates. As scheduled, they overlapped with the day he was supposed to receive a report from a messenger. The strategy was to have the messenger blend in with the festival, which would be full of milling visitors from elsewhere, and that would probably go quite well, but getting the report would require a bit of ingenuity.

That means we won't be able to move during the festival after all. We'll have to put things on hold...

Even when it came to gathering information, there would be a lot of static during the festival, and he probably wouldn't be able to use any of it.

“What is that face supposed to mean? Honestly... If you feel remorse, don't you think you should show it?”

“Huh?”

“By, for example, deepening your friendships with your guild companions at the festival.”

At her words, Shiroe looked blank, but now that he thought about it, she was perfectly right. It was an excellent idea. It probably wouldn't do him any harm to do something like that every once in a while.

“I'll try it.”

“And—”

Henrietta wagged a slender finger. In combination with her slim-framed glasses, it added an irresistible charm to her sophisticated beauty.

“Log Horizon is also one of the guilds on the Round Table Council. You will stir yourself and make things more exciting, I trust?”

“Uh... I'll see what I can do.”

“You promise, then,” Henrietta informed him, smiling brightly.

“Both Akatsuki and Minori are adorable, you see. I’m looking forward to it already; I really can’t wait. No, really... As long as I have these fantasies, I could live without food. They say man cannot live by bread alone, but bread and fantasies are enough to get you through most hardships, aren’t they. Dear lord...”

Henrietta put her hands to her cheeks and wriggled. She was terrifying, but Shiroe couldn’t send his precious guild members into the jaws of death without putting up any resistance. He’d have to ask just what that “promise” entailed.

“What sort of help will this be?”

“It’s quite simple. I only want you to assist with the exhibition and sale of our winter clothes.”

Just being a salesclerk had nothing to do with being adorable, did it?

Shiroe, who’d picked up on Henrietta’s vision of the future, mentally bowed to his guild members in apology and began to worry about what he could do to make up for this.

► 3

Raynesia, sinking into a sofa in comfortable loungewear, was eating a small, beautifully decorated bento. Bentos like this one were a type of take-out lunch that was relatively common in Akiba.

It’s delicious...

It was her first day off in a while.

Even as she basked in its sweetness, when Raynesia remembered her recent spell of hard work, her lithe, feminine body shivered. She heaved a terribly heavy sigh, and her shoulders slumped. Yes: She’d been deceived. By Krusty.

She’d fallen for the honeyed words “three meals and naps,” and she regretted her carelessness.

If she’d given it a little thought, she would have seen it.

At present, it was safe to say that Adventurers held the key to the situation in this world. All the lords of Eastal, the League of Free Cities—which had been organized by Raynesia’s grandfather—knew this, and they’d tried to take them in and use them, militarily and politically. Her disgust at this selfishness had been one of the reasons Raynesia herself had spoken sharply to the Lords’ Council.

At the time, she’d been desperate: She’d wanted to protect her home, but she hadn’t wanted to force a rude, selfish wish onto the Adventurers.

In a way, you could say that Raynesia had been rewarded. She’d

been supported by the goodwill of Krusty and the rest of the Round Table Council, and by the chivalry of the Adventurers, both her hometown of Maihama and the whole of Eastal had been saved.

However, now that the Zantleaf Peninsula sweep had been settled, the situation had reverted to its former state. Or rather, since the Adventurers had displayed their true strength to the lords, you could say the development had become even clearer.

The Adventurers had proven not just their combat abilities but their technical and economic power and the strength of their unity to the League. Of course, since they had shown their military power as well, there were probably no lords who would attempt to occupy Akiba, but there'd been an explosive increase in the number of lords who wanted to gain their friendship, to ally themselves with the Adventurers and to milk the relationship for all it was worth.

In fact, over the past month, Raynesia had seen so many examples of this that she was sick of them.

Having been transferred to a post in Akiba by her grandfather, Raynesia's position was something halfway between penance and a martial arts training journey. At the same time, however, she was also the first person in charge of negotiations to be dispatched from the League to Akiba.

She received many requests from the Round Table Council and participated in ceremonies and the like. As a daughter of the aristocracy, she was also invited to...ball-like gatherings. Thanks to the finishing-school gentility that had been drummed into her ever since she was born, these gatherings were a walk in the park (although, of course, they were also a pain in the neck). However, the problem lay elsewhere.

For example, prominent members of clans whose central occupation was commerce—or, to use the Adventurer term, clans who were production guilds—asked her for business-related advice. Conversely, wealthy merchants and aristocrats from Eastal asked her for introductions to the influential figures of Akiba.

If she failed to examine the content of these requests carefully before responding, she might lose their trust, and it could occasionally cause trouble of massive proportions.

Of course, if she turned them all down, she couldn't go wrong, but when the social world of aristocratic society was taken into consideration, there were some requests she simply couldn't refuse. Even if she did belong to the duchy that boasted the greatest power in northeastern Yamato, she wasn't its head; she was merely his granddaughter. Some willfulness would be allowed, but some would not.

On the other hand, the Adventurers said and did so little in the way of plotting that it shocked her. To them, the fact that she was a direct descendent of the head of one of the only two duchies in Yamato made her an object of interest and courtesy, but they didn't seem to think she had either the sort of authority that would obligate them to kneel, or rights and interests enough to compel them to get on her good side.

She was a Person of the Earth, and they came to ask her about her opinion and connections as such. The idea of using her rank to attempt to accomplish something didn't seem to have occurred to them.

She felt this was probably because they thought they—the Adventurers—were strong, and that, even if Raynesia was an aristocrat, she was a Person of the Earth, and therefore weak.

To Raynesia, this was vexing.

Of course she was glad to be acknowledged as an individual human being and not treated as a noble, but that gladness and the vexation were two sides of the same coin.

As an ordinary Person of the Earth, she was glad. As a powerless aristocrat, she was nonplussed.

And yet, that in itself is...

Now, in this situation, even that feeling seemed to have been a trap.

In order to fulfill aristocratic associations, honor, and ties of obligation, she'd had to learn about Adventurers and the town of Akiba. She didn't feel it was her place to say it, but the People of the Earth—particularly the nobles and powerful individuals—really knew nothing at all about the Adventurers. Because (perhaps unfortunately) they spoke the same language and looked similar, they came to feel that they *did* understand, but there were vast differences between their lifestyles and cultures. When they cooperated or made deals, if they didn't have a bare minimum of understanding, there were countless situations in which they would clash.

If she neglected to give nobles and wealthy merchants this sort of hard-to-hear advice and simply introduced them to Adventurers and production guilds, it was inevitable that a huge problem would occur someday.

Meanwhile, the Adventurers' questions put Raynesia in a gloomy mood. Adventurers were an extremely pragmatic breed, and for the most part, they wanted practical knowledge. Each individual

Adventurer was intelligent and highly educated. When she spoke with them, she was forced to realize that she knew nothing about her own people's country or lifestyles.

Because she wasn't a soldier, wasn't a civil servant, wasn't a man...

Up until now, for a variety of reasons, Raynesia had been kept away from the duchy's public political affairs, and she'd considered that only natural. However, when she talked with the Adventurers, she found she didn't even know anything about what the townspeople and farmers ate, what sort of houses they lived in, or what made them happy or sad, let alone about politics.

To the aristocrat Raynesia, knowing nothing about the lives and feelings of the citizens she was supposed to govern, let alone the Adventurers, was a keenly embarrassing thing.

As a result, responding seriously to requests from nobles and the Adventurers would require enormous amounts of knowledge and research, and the stretch of resulting work was so taxing that the words "three meals and naps" were absolutely nowhere to be seen.

"Agh... There really is no end to it."

The worst of it was that there was no ceiling to this sort of study. Even if she hit on some superb idea or piece of advice or match, nobody would guarantee that it was the best.

If she thought a little harder or investigated a little more, she might find a better idea. Either that, or if she planned just a tiny bit more carefully, she might be able to head off the worst of the trouble. These ideas were constantly in a corner of her mind, and even with the slacker nature Raynesia herself admitted she had, they hadn't let her cut corners.

She'd stayed at her work, paging through documents until she was truly worn out, and when she came down with a fever and collapsed—as you'd expect—Elissa had lectured her. Though, still, even though she didn't know what prompted that preaching, she'd gotten these three days off, so she probably shouldn't complain.

"Honestly! I refuse to do a thing."

Raynesia ate her bento elegantly with her tiny mouth.

Stewed vegetables, boiled greens in soy sauce. The brown thing was a miniature hamburger steak. It was a Japanese-European hybrid bento in the compact *maku-no-uchi* style.

From an aristocratic perspective, a tiny meal packed in a box like this would have been considered far too vulgar and shabby, but Raynesia liked them. In any case, even if she was offered a whole tableful of grilled meat, boiled meat, roasted meat, and whatnot, she

couldn't eat it all. She'd always simply eaten fruit and bread torn into small pieces and smiled. They'd called her fragile and similar things when she did this, which had made it terribly hard to cope.

In contrast, this little take-out lunch was an incredibly relaxing meal. Of course, in terms of flavor, postrevolution meals couldn't even be compared to what they had been before. This was so true that, at this point, she couldn't remember her gray-colored diet from before.

Vegetables pickled in salt and the rice the Adventurers liked had a real depth of flavor. The ones that had Raynesia's favorite sweet egg omelet in them were also pleasant. After she'd eaten the whole thing, Raynesia carefully closed the lid and set her fork on top of it. She was still learning how to use the utensils known as chopsticks.

"Could I have some tea, Elissa?"

The room was quiet and cool.

Could there be any luxury other than eating in her own, nest-like room without being criticized by anyone? No, Raynesia thought, there could not.

That said, Raynesia might have been the only one who thought she was being slovenly. Having undergone training ever since she was little, even if what she was wearing wasn't a velvet two-piece dress, she wore it with dignity, and she had what could be called a noble, elegant aura. She might think she was dressed as sloppily as could be, but her linen and georgette loungewear would have appeared quite formal to the Adventurers. Her fresh, youthful beauty, which led to her moniker of "Eastal's Winter Rose," was unchanged, and as she relaxed in her loungewear, smiling and enjoying her meal, her sweet expression matched her age.

Her nagging maid might have called her clothes and attitude scandalous, but after all, she had three days of vacation. Raynesia had made up her mind that she would not let this chance pass her by.

She was going to make up for all the slacking off she hadn't been able to do earlier.

It was all the fault of that brain eater, Krusty. She'd been tricked into this predicament by that lying, narrow-eyed knight.

As she accepted the tea that had been set down quietly and felt its hot steam on her cheeks, she realized how very busy things had been lately. It was as if a sweet tingling was spreading through every joint in her body. It was the unique sense of deep fulfillment that came right after having slept long and soundly.

Lately, the amount of time she slept just kept shrinking. The only words she had for that were "horrid abuse."

"Honestly. It's all that bullying menace's fault. How could things get so busy?... Next time, I shall have to teach him what rightful power relationships really are."

Just then, as Raynesia was enjoying the fragrant aroma and breathing a sigh of relief, a voice that really shouldn't have been there addressed her.

"I understand them quite well, so I won't require the lecture."

Krusty, seated on the sofa to Raynesia's right, retorted, looking unconcerned.

His tunic, which was intended to be worn about town, was dyed in several different shades that resembled the colors of dead leaves. In combination with his black-trimmed jacket, it gave Krusty an autumnal look, and his appearance was neat, as if he'd just finished dressing.

This merciless knight, who was so large he could have been called a giant, was certainly tall. However, since his arms and legs were also long and his physique was well-balanced, as long as he was simply walking around town in ordinary clothes, he didn't strike others as enormous. On the contrary, his profile was delicate enough to make him look like a scholar or researcher. On top of this, he was always neatly dressed, and he showed no vulnerabilities. Absolutely none. No matter how hard you looked, you'd find nothing.

It was terribly unfair that this warrior, who had given off such an ominous aura on the battlefield and had looked like a veritable giant, seemed so quiet in town.

The timing of Krusty's appearance had been unbelievable, and Raynesia's mouth flapped uselessly in protest.

"Ah. Ah! Aah!"

"Scream or struggle if you like, but I think you should put this down first."

Krusty spoke quietly, taking the ceramic cup out of Raynesia's violently trembling hands. His calm attitude made Raynesia's mind boil over all at once, making it impossible for her to think properly.

"Wha, wha!!"

She couldn't pull her thoughts together. Why was he here? Who had allowed it? What did he mean by invading a lady's private room (although, since it was also her office, that part was debatable)? These questions rose up and vanished in a fit of anger.

Raynesia scooted backward on her behind, shifting position, and fled to the end of the sofa. In physical terms, she'd moved only about a meter, which wasn't nearly enough when you considered the length of Krusty's arms, but unfortunately, if she went any farther, she'd fall off the sofa.

"Wh-what ti—"

"In terms of time, I believe it's about ten o'clock."

“How—”

“Elissa let me through in the usual way.”

“Wh-wh-why—”

“I heard you were recuperating, so I came to harass you.”

Raynesia was speechless.

Harass, he’d said. This menace had actually said “harass,” as if it was nothing!

“.....Ah.”

“So this is harassment, then?!”

“Pardon me. Since there were no aristocratic ears around, I carelessly misspoke. You were terribly busy performing your duties, Princess Raynesia, and I came to show my support for your efforts. Simply to encourage you, as it were.”

As he brought tea—the same sort of tea that had been served to Raynesia—to his lips, Krusty spoke calmly in a laid-back voice. His words had been sealed over with lies from corner to corner, and they really couldn’t be trusted.

For her part, Raynesia was trembling (at least internally) on the very end of the sofa. In her mind, she heard Elissa scolding her—*And you a princess of Maihama, the pride of Eastal! For shame!*—but even if someone had actually said that to her, there was nothing to be done.

“Well. That’s enough joking for now.”

“Um...”

“How is the Libra Festival looking?”

Krusty’s question had been casual, but Raynesia realized that this was probably the main issue of the day.

The Libra Festival was a celebration that was being held by the entire town of Akiba. Raynesia’s understanding was that the Adventurers were holding the festival to celebrate their safety and prosperity. Apparently, they would bring all sorts of things and show them to each other, exchange them, and sell them. The fact that there would be no prayers to the spirits or gods and that it seemed quite a lot like a market made it different from the festivals Raynesia knew, but the part where lots of people would get together and have fun was the same. At least, these were the reports Raynesia had received.

At the Libra Festival, many Adventurers would gather and sell items, and lots of People of the Earth merchants were expected to come as well. In fact, Raynesia had received lots of letters requesting that she act as a go-between with the Adventurers.

“Yes. Well...”

“You’re busy, it’s hard, it’s too much responsibility.”

He’d read her mind again. Raynesia was afraid, but by now, she was no longer really surprised. *Please don’t do that*, she thought

deliberately. That thought was sure to have gotten through to him as well. ...Not that he'd ever held back, of course.

However, contrary to this fearful feeling, it was true that talking with Krusty was easy. He picked up everything, including things that were hard to say and things she wanted him to notice.

"I am...doing my job properly."

"Yes, I expect you are."

She argued back in a subdued way, but he turned it aside easily.

Apparently this mind-reading menace wasn't about to be kind enough to pick up on Raynesia's efforts and hardship.

"....."

"Is something the matter?"

"No. Nothing."

Raynesia turned away. She'd ignore him. She averted her face from the gentleman who was there with her, putting on a bored expression. It was a perfect attack. She was through letting Krusty's honeyed words fool her. With that firm thought, although she'd been watching Krusty out of the corner of her eye, Raynesia hastily turned her gaze away. Snorting would have been far too rude, so she refrained from that (and in fact, she had no memory of ever doing such a thing before, but he made her want to).

"The preparations for the dinner party are underway," she said. "It's all right. I'm doing things correctly."

At Raynesia's words, Krusty looked a little surprised. Maybe he'd considered her grossly incompetent. If that was what he thought, then he could just as well stop sending work her way.

"...Oh. The one you're hosting..."

...But apparently he'd only forgotten.

What a truly exasperating menace.

Raynesia was hosting the dinner party held on the evening of the second day. Of course, "hosting" carried the nuance of "as a representative," and there was nothing for her to do regarding the preparations or cooking.

Raynesia's job was to attend the main dinner party and greet the invited guests. She was simply managing the event as its hostess. Not only that, but in the town of Akiba, even this main role would be abbreviated in comparison to the many dinner parties Raynesia had attended in the past.

Adventurers disliked empty formalities.

In the month since she'd taken up her post in the town, her impression of this idea had changed slightly.

It wasn't that they hated empty formalities. They just didn't see the point. Since they didn't see the point, they didn't learn them, so

they had no knowledge of complicated manners and etiquette.

The Adventurers had a serious lack of knowledge regarding the world of Yamato and the People of the Earth society. Sometimes, when she saw them like that, it made her wonder whether they were infants.

But that's...

That was probably true for both sides, Raynesia thought.

Raynesia was relatively more involved with the Adventurers than most People of the Earth, but when they began a serious discussion with others of their kind, even if she was standing beside them listening, she couldn't follow half of what they said. She didn't understand any of the specialized terminology they used. She didn't understand more than half the points of view they brought up, and even when she did understand the meaning itself, she couldn't fathom why they'd say such outrageous things.

Adventurers didn't even understand the concept of aristocrats and commoners.

As that example showed, there was still a considerable distance between the two groups.

However, it was a distance they would be able to close.

At least, that was what Raynesia thought.

The same issue was behind the fact that this ceremonial dinner had been planned as a dinner party and not a banquet.

If it had been a banquet, the invited guests would have been seated at tables by rank and had food served to them. Raynesia would have presided over the event, including the meal, and shown hospitality to the guests.

Dinner parties, which were unheard of among the People of the Earth, were a type of feast that was similar to—and yet was not—a banquet. Several different types of dishes were placed in readiness here and there around the venue, and were then carried around. At this feast, there was no fixed seating order for guests. They would stand and eat, as at a ball.

She'd contrived it so that the invited guests and as many different types of people from Akiba as possible could attend.

As Akiba's governing institution, the Round Table Council was certainly important, but anyone who wanted to be accepted as a friend of the Adventurers would have to connect with a variety of different people. If the Adventurers' way was to refrain from separating aristocrats and commoners, then everyone should be

treated as aristocrats.

With that thought, Raynesia had requested the help of the Round Table Council and planned the dinner party as a large-scale ceremony.

It was an expression of gratitude for the Adventurers' role in the Zantleaf war, as well as a display of Raynesia's good faith.

The conflict at Zantleaf, which had occurred two months previously, had influenced the world in a variety of ongoing ways, but the cleanup had finally come to an end. Those were Raynesia's feelings as she prepared for the Libra Festival.

It was likely that Krusty intended to come up with some pretext or other to foist another tremendously heavy responsibility off onto her, but this time, she absolutely refused to be sweet-talked into it. Raynesia turned away from him, loading the gesture with determination.

Her peaceful days (and not only that, but a gourmet lifestyle in Akiba) were finally about to arrive. No matter what, she had to avoid having work forced onto her or being dragged into something tiresome.

However, contrary to expectations, the impossible demand Krusty was bound to inflict on her (making it look like a simple task at first glance) never arrived. Krusty only quietly drank his tea.

Time in the room flowed slowly.

What is this menace thinking...?

Even as she worried, time passed, little by little.

Air that seemed to have had a yawn dissolved into it arrived, bringing drowsiness. The noise of festival preparations, like the murmur of distant waves, and the monotonous sound of the clock on the wall were like a fiendish, sleep-inducing spell.

Raynesia had planned to spend the whole day in idleness, so this situation wasn't a problem for her. The sofa was soft, and she wouldn't have minded spending half a day on it this way. All of that was perfect. The only issue was Krusty.

Even if Raynesia was an aristocrat brimming over with adventurous spirit, she couldn't sit daydreaming beside a man forever.

When she glanced at him—stealthily, so that he wouldn't notice—Krusty had set his cup down on the coffee table and seemed to be gazing out the window at the town, which looked as if it might melt into the autumn light.

He had a beautiful profile. The murderous intent he'd shown when he fought the Goblins had made him seem like a man-eating fiend, but not a trace of it was visible in him now.

Come to think of it, this person is a monster, so he knows all about

everything anyway.

Raynesia's mood grew lighter, as if an evil spirit had left her.

—But just a tiny bit.

A bare two palms' worth.

Raynesia shifted back toward the center of the sofa.

The distance between them had closed slightly, although it was still wide enough that two Raynesias could have sat between them, but...

Krusty shrugged. Without saying a word, he continued to sit on the sofa, peacefully enjoying his tea.

► 4

"We're all done loading!"

"Yeah, here too."

Cheerful voices echoed back and forth, letting them know that the caravan was ready to move out.

"Rudy. We're going."

"Understood, Miss Isuzu."

As he responded to Isuzu's voice, Rundelhaus—a handsome young man with blond hair, blue eyes, and sweet, well-favored features—put a map and small articles into his rucksack.

Isuzu herself had already finished organizing her belongings. All she needed to do to be completely ready was stand up and slap the dust off her rump a couple of times.

In this other world, outdoor activities meant roughing it in the literal sense of the word. The idea of just running down to the convenience store didn't exist. Even the town of Akiba was filled with ruins and littered with rubble; in places where the ancient trees grew thickly, you'd have thought there was a forest right in the middle of town. If you took one step outside the town, unspoiled nature jostled or merged with the civilization humans had created.

Much of Adventurer fashion was showy or magnificent, but it lasted only because of the Adventurers' superhuman strength and the special function that automatically got rid of dirt.

Isuzu thought that if you had the sensibilities of a girl who worked very hard on her nail art (that is, a fastidious loathing of dirt), it would probably be tough.

Fortunately, Isuzu wasn't that fussy about cleanliness, and jobs that involved a little dirt didn't bother her at all.

Carrying instruments around was heavy work, and playing them for a long time required physical strength. Although they weren't Isuzu's specialty, wind instruments required lung capacity, and the wood bass that *was* Isuzu's specialty weighed over ten kilograms.

Fundamentally, the brass band club was more an athletics club than a cultural club.

Besides, I'm a country girl anyway, she murmured silently, shrugging her shoulders.

She was from a town where the school was surrounded by rice paddies, and frogs croaked away in them in spring.

Isuzu was a Bard with a freckled profile and bright eyes. She wore thin leather armor, and her abundant hair was bound into a braid. She shouldered a big, two-handed spear that didn't match her class; that was just her style.

It had already been three months since she'd been released from Hamelin, a guild that had exploited new players. By now, she'd grown completely used to living as an Adventurer, and her days passed peacefully.

For that reason, taking a break in the forest like this didn't strike her as stressful at all. She could sit directly on stumps, and she didn't feel she was the sort of girl who'd grimace because her butt had gotten dirty.

Nevertheless, Isuzu's companion treated Isuzu—quite more than enough—as a girl.

“Miss Isuzu? Here.”

Lending a hand to Isuzu—who'd been about to put her foot into the stirrup—Rundelhaus boosted her up onto the horse's back. For his part, he leapt up to sit astride his own mount with a fresh attitude completely devoid of sarcasm.

“What's wrong, Miss Isuzu?”

The young man, Rundelhaus Code, turned back to Isuzu with a puzzled expression.

A People of the Earth Adventurer. It sounded contradictory, but it was exactly what made him unique and incredibly rare in this world. He was practically the only one of his kind.

His blond hair and blue eyes made him look like a prince from a girls' manga, and his handsome features were elegant. His eyes still held traces of rich-kid naïveté, but even so, there was dignity and a strong will in them as well.

That said, because he was *too* elegant, Isuzu thought of him as a golden retriever puppy. In other words, the young man's effervescent charm won out over his elegance in her mind.

“Are you sure, Adventurers? Really sure?”

“Yes, of course,” Isuzu answered.

The question had come from a Person of the Earth who was leading the caravan. They were about to start for the town of Akiba. If they left now, they’d reach it before evening.

Isuzu and Rundelhaus had come out for early-morning combat training and hunting. When they’d spotted the caravan, they’d decided to act as its escorts until it reached Akiba.

Right now, Isuzu and Rundelhaus were at Eight Canals High Coast. On Earth, it was the area around the mouth of the Tama River known as Keihin Port.

The area was about two and a half hours from Akiba on one of the Adventurers’ horses, and it was one of Isuzu and Rundelhaus’s favorite spots. Of course, that meant slightly different things to them.

When it came to combat training, Rundelhaus never compromised, and in addition to the hunting he did with his guild mates, he never neglected his own voluntary training. He could meditate and repeat new spells in any modest open space, but when working to improve magic control and hit accuracy, it was best to have an appropriate opponent... In other words, a monster.

This area, which had monsters that could be subdued by one person and was also in the vicinity of Akiba, was an ideal hunting ground. To Rundelhaus, Eight Canals High Coast was a convenient place for independent training.

Meanwhile, it was Isuzu’s favorite walking course.

There were many places where she and her brave, loyal hound Rundelhaus could go for walks outdoors, but Eight Canals High Coast lay along a river; the scenery was beautiful, and if you went downstream, you could look out over the ocean as well. It was a rather luxurious place.

Slightly over two hours one way was a bit far for a walk, but during this period, when combat training had been suspended during the commotion over the festival, it was the perfect way to kill time.

—Of course, Isuzu hadn’t forgotten that the goal was to hone her own and Rundelhaus’s combat abilities. In this dangerous new frontier, leveling up was the quickest way to protect yourself.

Acquiring new techniques wasn’t the only effect leveling up had. It also raised players’ hit points and all types of resistance.

The amount of damage you took when attacked by a monster of a certain level depended on how powerful the monster’s attacks were, but the relationship between your level and the monster’s also exerted an important influence. If your level was higher than the monster’s, that alone was generally enough to reduce the damage. In this world, undergoing combat training and raising your level moved you closer to safety, little by little, all by itself.

Isuzu had nearly lost Rundelhaus once.

She had no intention of repeating the experience.

For that reason, the two of them had come out here early that morning, but after noon, several hours after they'd begun training (or their "walk"), they'd run across this caravan. There were five freight wagons in total, with a group of about twenty People of the Earth. They said the caravan had departed from Izu and was bound for Akiba. They'd heard rumors about the Libra Festival and were on their way to sell their specialty products, and to purchase anything noteworthy they happened to see.

Isuzu talked it over with Rundelhaus.

By and large, the types of monsters that appeared in field zones were determined by the region. The monsters that prowled through deep forests and mountain ranges were stronger than the ones in the surrounding areas, but aside from that, in general, the closer you got to human settlements, the fewer powerful monsters there were. This area, which was close to Akiba, a player town, was relatively safe.

However, that was only as far as Adventurers were concerned.

Isuzu knew that for People of the Earth, journeys were always a series of dangerous situations. Over the past month, little by little, Rundelhaus had told her about the People of the Earth. About how powerlessly they lived in this world filled with monsters.

After talking it over, the two of them had decided to escort the caravan to Akiba. Of course, even without their escort, the caravan was almost certain to reach Akiba. Without exception, traveling merchants were cautious types.

However, even if they stayed with the traders, it would be for only half a day or so; in the end, it would simply mean going home slowly. When it came to combat training, even with guarding the caravan, all they had to do was wipe out the monsters as they saw them. With this in mind, Isuzu and Rundelhaus offered to act as escorts.

The People of the Earth had hesitated at first, but when they told them the only reward they needed was a meal, they agreed.

I knew they'd be hesitant around us...

It made Isuzu a little sad, but she resigned herself to it, thinking there was no help for it.

To People of the Earth, even if the Adventurers were close, they were distant beings. Akiba's People of the Earth were used to Adventurers, but Rundelhaus had warned her, again and again, that they would be treated as completely different creatures farther out in the country.

The caravan traveled down a hill road that sketched a gentle slope under the fall sun. But the horse-drawn wagons were surprisingly noisy; the wooden bodies didn't have much in the way of cushions or absorbers, and they creaked loudly as they picked up every bump and dip in the road.

Just to hear them, you would have thought they were about to fall to pieces, but they must have been built quite sturdily. All the key places on the wagons had been reinforced with iron bands, and they advanced slowly, loaded to the limit with cargo.

"Say, Master Merchant. What is it you're carrying here?"

Rundelhaus directed a calm question at the slow procession. The caravan leader was sitting on the driver's box and had been talking to a young merchant back in the bed of the wagon, but he raised his head at the sound of Rundelhaus's voice.

"Well, let's see, Adventurer. Most of our trade is in fruit, so there's bitter oranges and kumquats and olives. We've also got spices and liquor in the load. When we start back, I'd like to be able to buy up clothes or dishes or some such to take with us."

"Something does smell wonderful!"

On hearing his answer, Isuzu nodded several times.

A sweet, invigorating fragrance hung in the air around the wagons. In this season, naturally, there was very little raw, fresh fruit, and the goods in the barrels had probably been preserved in sugar. They gave off a brilliant perfume.

As a rule, Adventurers were wealthy. In addition, compared to People of the Earth, they were known for paying generously for things besides the items needed for survival, which made them good customers.

"Yes, these are our special syrup preserves. We hope the people of Akiba will buy up the lot."

Rundelhaus nodded in response to the merchant's affable smile.

"Still, we've certainly been seeing a lot of merchants over the past few days."

"Well, sure. It's the autumn festival."

After giving the verbal jab to Rundelhaus, Isuzu pondered something. Rundelhaus was an exceptionally ambitious young man. With magic combat in particular, he trained hard, as if he were extraordinarily determined or wanted to carry out some sort of duty. That was why they'd come out this far today to train, but if he *always* did that, Rundelhaus would break. ...This was something Isuzu worried about often. As the guardian of this fuzzy-headed, willful, single-minded young guy, it was Isuzu's job to keep him from getting out of control.

Rudy should relax and play a bit.

Once she'd made that decision, things moved quickly in her mind.

Isuzu had a list of places she secretly wanted to go. Festivals meant music, and music meant festivals. There were lots of events she wanted to see, and lots of things she wanted to eat. She'd determined that they would participate in the night's public bonfire performance if she had to tie a rope around Rundelhaus's neck. She'd heard a rumor that Bards would be welcome to join in.

"There are sea routes, too, then."

"Yes indeed. Lately, there's... You know. The Nine-Tails..."

"...Right."

"They say that's been sorted out, and that ship voyages are more stable. They say the merchants from the West are coming in by boat. I hear there's some new thing called a spirit ship, and it's real fast. Still, it's nothing humble, ordinary traders like us are ever likely to see."

Isuzu was thinking about her plans for that evening, so she didn't notice that Rundelhaus looked as if he was suppressing pain. However, it would have been mean to blame her for it. With the fastidious stoicism unique to adolescence, Rundelhaus wiped the expression from his face in an instant, so that even the merchant he was talking to suspected nothing.

The distinctive landscape of southern Akiba—which was no more than a pile of rubble, as though it had been mowed down by an enormous explosion—passed by, and before long, the green of the ancient trees came into view.

It would probably be several more hours before they reached the town of Akiba, but from this spot, the caravan that was heading for the town and the individual traders who'd loaded their cargo onto the backs of ponies began to see it. It probably wasn't an illusion that everyone's steps seemed to grow lighter and quicker.

In the town of Akiba, the fall festival was just about to begin.

Even as they kept up their careful watch, the two caravan escorts drew nearer to the town they called home.

► 5

"My liege. I have brought your clothes."

Dexterously pushing the door open with her back, Akatsuki entered.

As usual, I don't understand Akatsuki's idea of a master-servant relationship.

Even as he thought this, Shiroe crossed to the table that had been set up at one end of the room. His room was vast: about twenty tatami mats' worth of floor area. Though the building—Log Horizon headquarters—had been pointlessly spacious to begin with. They'd moved the room dividers several times, and as a result, Shiroe had come into possession of nearly a third of the second floor's east side.

In this other world, the amount of information that would have fit on a handheld device—let alone a personal computer—turned into enough documents to bury several shelves and tables. It wasn't efficient, either to search or to organize, but if he didn't do it, he wouldn't even be able to direct traffic for the situation right in front of his nose.

"Your face is pale."

As usual, when Akatsuki peeked up at him from below, Shiroe started in spite of himself. This petite, beautiful girl wasn't aware that she was a beautiful girl. Because she gazed at him steadily, without looking away, Shiroe always had a close-up view of her large, black eyes, like polished obsidian; and her lips, which shone with a jellylike luster. It made him feel nervous and scattered.

And besides, lately...

She'd shown symptoms of it from the beginning, but lately, Akatsuki had grown far too good at getting into his personal space. He didn't know whether it was because she was small or because of a special class ability, but she would slip through the gaps between breaths when he let his mind wander and then appear startlingly close to him.

At this distance, he didn't even have to put out a hand: He could feel the warmth of her body just by bending down slightly. Shiroe found a lot of things about this sense of distance uncomfortable, but Akatsuki didn't seem to notice. She just worried about Shiroe with a focused seriousness that reminded him of a small animal.

"No, it isn't."

"I see."

Akatsuki responded without seeming all that concerned, then briskly began folding the clothes on the sofa. They were everyday clothes that had been hanging out to dry on an upper floor.

Adventurer equipment, armor, and robes had set durability values. If their durability decreased, they'd get dirty and break, but when repaired by someone in a suitable subclass, they became good as new again. There was no need to wash them.

However, the items that were made in Akiba these days—the ones the Adventurers and People of the Earth created with their own hands—did get dirty and tear, and the Repair command wouldn't restore

them. They had to launder them properly, like this.

Of course, the sight of white shirts flapping on a rope strung through the green shadows of the tree wasn't a bad one. Among the members of Log Horizon, laundry was a popular chore.

There weren't all that many garments.

With the two of them folding, they were done before they knew it. Akatsuki began to pour Black Rose Tea into glasses. The things she'd taken out of her Magic Bag appeared to be today's snack: *anpan*, rolls filled with sweet red bean paste. The distribution of wheat in Yamato was high, and bread was eaten relatively often. There was rice, too, of course, but after bread was baked, it kept better than rice did. Lately, culinary research was advancing, and different types of bread had begun to appear on the market.

Novel breads were expensive, but once a little time had passed and they began to be mass-produced, the price came down. Since people's habits hadn't changed, that sort of trade phenomenon was the same even in this world.

The price of this plain *anpan* had come down quite a bit, but it was still a little too expensive for a snack. Holding a roll in her left hand, Akatsuki held the remaining one out to Shiroe on a small plate.

"Are you sure?"

"My treat. I want you to eat it."

Akatsuki's answer was brief. Shiroe wasn't quite sure how to respond to the offer.

The reason was that Shiroe had had a lot of paperwork for the Round Table Council lately, and he hadn't been able to go out to the field. Akatsuki, who went afield to train Minori, Touya, and the others, was earning more money than he was. That meant there was no need for him to worry about the state of Akatsuki's wallet when she bought *anpan*. Even so, Shiroe was the guild master, and most important, he was an adult male. Making a little girl (which was what she looked like) treat him to something was embarrassing.

Even to him, this pride seemed small-minded, but it was a problem of feelings, and there was nothing to do about the reluctance. That said, if he insisted on trying to look good, he'd actually look a lot worse. Shiroe thanked her and accepted the *anpan*.

Seeing this, Akatsuki took a big bite of her own roll. The two of them sat side by side on the low sofa, kicking their legs out in front of them, and enjoying the sweetness of the red bean paste.

"....."

"What's the matter, Akatsuki?"

"Um, well..."

Akatsuki's gaze wandered through space, as though she were searching for words.

"My liege, you..."

Shiroe gave her a quizzical look.

"...What are you doing for the festival?"

"Huh?"

That wasn't a question Shiroe could answer easily.

Come to think of it, Henrietta had asked him to do something as well. Come to think of it, if he stayed shut up in his office all the time like this, his guild members might actually forget what he looked like.

"Henrietta asked me for a favor, so I'm helping her. Something about a fashion show... I suspect I'll be delivering the opening remarks somewhere."

"I see. Still, that's not what I meant."

He gave her another quizzical look.

"Shiroe!"

It was Minori who'd burst in. She was carrying a brown paper parcel in both hands as if it was something important, but when she noticed Akatsuki from the doorway, she stumbled forward a step or two, then stood still.

Minori, who'd faltered, was dressed in clothes she liked and wore around town a lot lately: a blouse with a large ribbon on it and culottes. As if in response to Shiroe's questioning look, she hesitated several times, then spoke.

"Shiroe. Um, it's about the Libra Festival tomorrow. Would you go in with me?"

"Go in?"

"I mean eat. Would you eat with me?"

The flyer Minori held out had "Cake Buffet" written on it in bright colors.

Shiroe had no idea what this was about. When he turned back to Akatsuki to ask for an explanation, Akatsuki was holding one of the same "Cake Buffet" flyers in front of her chest. She had an oddly serious expression on her face.

"Shiroe, you don't dislike sweet things, do you?"

"No, I wouldn't say I dislike them."

"I could tell that from the way you ate the *anpan*."

He was rather fond of mild sweetness.

"My liege. Let's go. If a man and woman attend together, this is *free*."

"Shiroe. Would you go with me? It is free, you know? Free."

From what he saw on the flyer, to participate, you had to be accompanied by someone of the opposite gender—in other words, a couple—the time limit was forty-five minutes, and if you ate a total of

eight or more pieces, it was free. In addition, apparently, the top two pairs would advance to the main match.

Four per person, hm...?

It would be cake, after all. They could probably manage that much easily. However, he sensed something unusual in their enthusiasm. It might have been his imagination, but Akatsuki and Minori seemed to be very aware of each other. This troubled Shiroe. Still, for some reason, he was hesitant to just ask them about it. Why was that?

...Oh. Come to think of it, it's always been...

Yes, it had always been like *that*.

Now that he thought about it, the Debauchery Tea Party had been that way, too. It had invariably been the female players who'd blurted out whims, and *she* had been at the top of the list. When Shiroe's thoughts had taken him that far, he heaved a deep, mental sigh. If all women were like that (and the possibility was incredibly high), then going against them here would not be wise.

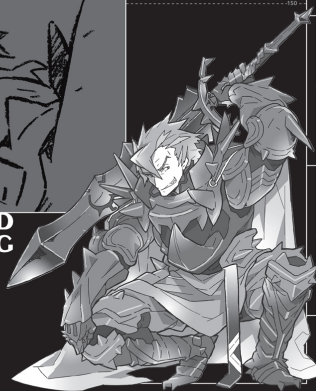
"What do you think...Shiroe?"

"My liege, my liege!"

As the two girls pressed him, pestering, Shiroe's only alternative was to raise the white flag.

2

SWALLOW AND STARLING



▶ NAME: ISAAC

▶ LEVEL: 90

▶ RACE: HUMAN

▶ CLASS: GUARDIAN

▶ HP: 14009

▶ MP: 6768

▶ ITEM 1:

BLACK SWORD OF PAIN
A FANTASY-CLASS WEAPON
ACQUIRED BY CLEARING THE
"MAGNETITE'S"
THROAT GUEST. SAYS
ACQUISITION WAS THE
EASIEST IN THE WORLD.
ITS ABILITY TO SELECT A
PORTION OF ALL DAMAGE
THE WIELDER TAKES AS HATE
IS THE ENEMY OF ALL GUARDIANS.

▶ ITEM 2:

PERSONALIZED GUILD TAGS
GUILD TAGS IN THE SHAPE OF THE
BLACK SWORD. CREATED AFTER
THE CATHARTIC BY
ATTITUDE IN A HUB.
ISAAC HAD TAGS MADE
FOR GOLD MEMBERS
WHO WEREN'T LOGGED
IN AT THE TIME OF
THE CATHARTIC. AS WELL
AND HE HAS BEEN
HOLDING ON TO THEM.

▶ ITEM 3:

ARMOR OF DIVINE FLAME
FANTASY-CLASS ARMOR
ACQUIRED BY CLEARING
BOTH THE "GORMON"
FANTASY METAL GUEST
AND THE "MOOT BELLOUS
OF THE GODS" GUEST.
IT HAS HIGH RESISTANCE
TO FLAME AND COLD
AIR, AND ALL ITS BASIC
STATS ARE HIGH LEVEL.








<TIN CUP>
A TRAVELER'S FRIEND.
SOMETIMES AN INSTRUMENT.

In front of the crate that held her clothes, Minori was at a loss.

Not like that. Not like this, either. She took out garments and held them up to herself, but to her flustered mind, none of them looked quite right. However, she didn't toss aside the ones she'd taken out; she folded them neatly and put them away, which was just like her. Mentally, though, she was stretched to the limit.

Since Shiroe had given his permission, they'd be participating in the cake buffet, but Minori's objective wasn't free cake. This was all for Shiroe and his guild, Log Horizon.

This one looks sort of little kid-ish. This one matches Touya's. And this one's...too drab. Well, it is work clothes, after all.

Carefully, Minori folded up yet another outfit, a chartreuse overall.

This room was hers.

To Minori, who'd been forced to room with a whole group of people at Hamelin, it was so spacious it seemed to be almost too much of a luxury for her.

When they'd joined Log Horizon, in light of her skills, Minori had asked to share a room with Touya. However, Shiroe and Naotsugu had said, "The building's big, so don't stand on ceremony," and had gotten a private room ready for her.

It was such a nice room that comparing it to Hamelin seemed rude. The breeze that blew in through the window had become one of Minori's favorite things.

However, it wasn't that the room was decorated grandly. It was simply *big*. Even though it was only for her, it had about ten tatami mats' worth of area, and both the floor and the walls were made of wood. There wasn't much furniture in that big room: just a few crates, a bed and a low table.

Because this was Minori's private room, and the other guild members acknowledged it, she could decorate it any way she liked. If she asked, they were sure to help her carry in furniture, and they

might even make something for her themselves. However, Minori's innate frugality and reserve made her hesitant to buy items that cost large sums of money.

She might still be middle class, but lately, Minori had been earning quite a bit.

One major factor was that she went to the fields and hunted regularly. The main objective was for the four midclass players—Minori, Touya, Rundelhaus, and Isuzu—to get combat practice, but naturally, even if it was training, they got loot.

There were all sorts of items that could be acquired after battles: meat and fur from animal-type monsters; equipment, money, and goods from intelligent monsters. These were collectively known as drop items, and many of them were exchanged for cash or used as materials within the production classes.

In Log Horizon's case, they kept back items that Nyanta the Chef or Shiroe the Scribe could use, but they exchanged all other items for money.

When the four of them went out training together, they quietly slipped a good portion of what they earned into the guild's bank account. No one had actually suggested it, but it was something thoughtful that had become a habit for the younger group (which was what they'd come to call the lower-level players) somewhere along the way.

However, if a leader like Naotsugu or Nyanta was with them, they couldn't accomplish this. The amount was divided neatly and equally among each person present and promptly pushed into their hands. According to Nyanta, "When mew're suitably rewarded, it fosters professional attitudes." They understood the logic, but it was hard to just nod and accept it.

This was true for her companions as well, but Minori felt indebted to Shiroe and Log Horizon.

In addition, this guild had its own dedicated cook in the form of Nyanta.

In Akiba at present, a large part of the cost of living was food-related expenses.

The only thing that resembled heating and lighting expenses was lamp oil, and even there, half the classes could substitute magic for it. Housing expenses included inn lodging fees or guild fees, but these were very cheap. Not only that, but if they felt like it, there were plenty of ruins to camp in.

That meant the largest part of living expenses in Akiba was the cost of food. As a result, the Adventurers' Engel coefficient didn't bear looking at. It was so bad that many Adventurers spent a percentage of

income that would have been equivalent to rent in the old world on food.

Thanks to Nyanta's home cooking, food-related costs—that greatest expense—weren't necessary at Log Horizon.

Since Minori and the others belonged to it, even if they were putting money into the guild as well, there was no way their own savings wouldn't grow. Minori's account already held quite a tidy sum.

As a result, she had money to spare.

There was enough for her to get a complete set of furnishings for her room. ...Provided she was discriminating about level, of course.

Since this world had originally been a game, the range of item types was truly vast. For example, there was infinite variety even among beds, which ranged from wooden beds meant simply as places to sleep to canopy beds that were works of art, carved from ivory and obsidian. Beds were made by people with the production subclass Woodworker, and the successive level expansions had continued to add items that were higher level and hard to make but could be sold at high prices. As a result, even though they were all beds, the item variations had acquired a several-hundred-fold price spread.

This meant that—although extraordinarily expensive, high-rank items did exist—as long as you chose low-rank items, furniture wasn't an expensive purchase at all. *Elder Tales* had originally been a game, and no matter what production system they belonged to, items included in its recipes could be completed in ten seconds simply by selecting them from the menu. Prices were influenced only by the difference in difficulty of obtaining the material and the level of the artisan who processed them, and there was no concept of hours worked.



As such, a bed or chest of drawers that used Japanese Cedar or Oak—items which could be gathered in low-level fields—could be purchased for the cost of a single meal.

Even so, all Minori had purchased were several wooden crates to store her belongings in and a bed that was plain but comfortable. A single low table that looked a bit like a *kotatsu*. A futon set, and several cushions. That was it.

It was a very plain room.

The bottom line was that Minori's nature just wasn't suited to lavish spending.

For that very reason, all the clothes Minori was rummaging through now were quite respectable. They were well tailored; sturdy and not worn down; clean-looking; the sort of things she'd never have to be embarrassed about wearing when she passed people in town... But, unfortunately, they weren't very interesting.

This just won't do, will it...

She held up a light blue dress, but it looked too young as well. She didn't think she could even set Shiroe off to advantage in clothes like these.

I'll go get something better.

Making up her mind, Minori opened her clasp coin purse. This old-fashioned wallet belonged to her. In the days when this world was a game, currency had simply been listed on the character screen as a weightless item, but now you had to put it in a wallet and carry it around with you. Wallets were a surprisingly popular item.

Minori's objective was to rehabilitate Shiroe.

"Rehabilitate," or "debut," or possibly "advertise."

Frankly speaking, Shiroe's reputation in Akiba wasn't very good. Of course, Shiroe was one of the eleven guild masters. Since he was one of the representatives of the Round Table Council, it was safe to say that his name recognition had jumped compared to what it had been a little while ago.

To begin with, the Round Table Council itself had come about in large part because of Shiroe's plan. In Akiba, this was common knowledge among people who were even slightly well informed. However, the problem wasn't the sheer height of his name recognition, but the content of his reputation.

The unanimous opinion of the general public was that Shiroe was a counselor type. However, in combination with his "Machiavelli-

with-glasses” byname, the idea that he was underhanded and merciless was circulating through Akiba.

Apparently, the speech in which Raynesia made her appeal for military volunteers had been lethal.

During that speech, it had looked as though Shiroe was persecuting Princess Raynesia. Starting about then, Shiroe’s image had become that of a schemer who, although competent and a born counselor, was cruel and completely lacking in human warmth.

This was painful for Minori.

To her, Shiroe was a hero.

Nobody understood, but he was a kind person. Minori truly believed that there were very few players as kind as Shiroe.

When Minori and the other newbie players had been trapped by Hamelin, hadn’t Shiroe been the only one who’d tried to save them? No one other than Shiroe had directly confronted what everyone else had averted their eyes from.

Shiroe was Minori’s hero.

So the fact that many people had the wrong idea about him made her sad. On top of that sadness, it was sure to cast a shadow over the guild’s future operation. Log Horizon was just one of the smaller guilds that had put down roots in Akiba. There was no telling what sort of disadvantages this negative image would inflict on it.

At the very least, Minori knew that Shiroe was a good, kind person. She loved everyone else in Log Horizon too, and the guild was the place where she belonged now. She wanted to clear away as many of the bad rumors as possible.

Then this festival had come along.

In truth, some of the responsibility for Shiroe’s weird image did lay with himself.

In the first place, Shiroe was in charge of planning and investigation; he didn’t put in frequent appearances at artisan meetings like the guild master of a production guild, or have many opportunities to conduct joint expeditions with lots of members from other guilds and return in triumph, the way combat guilds did.

The guild masters of big guilds seemed to consider public relations and recruiting to be part of guild activities. At least, that was what Minori had heard. As a result, even the ones who had a general reputation for disliking people didn’t hesitate to come into contact with them, both at public and private events. Many guild masters were surprisingly sociable, conscientious individuals.

In contrast, although Shiroe wasn’t a misanthrope, he was indifferent about social activities. And especially of late, he’d been

buried in mountains of reports and living like a hermit.

In other words, since the root of the problem lay in Shiroe's failure to go out more often, all she had to do was present him to the people of Akiba more frequently. Free cake buffet aside, if they won there, they'd be invited to the great dinner party on the final day. She'd heard somewhere that staff from *Akikuro*—Akiba's newspaper—would be there too, and if everything went well...

As Minori gave wing to her fantasies, she was abruptly pulled back to reality.

But still, we'll be eating cake together, so...

Wearing a drab outfit really would be a problem, too, so...

Technically, unless Shiroe coolly solved a town issue or gave a rousing speech, his reputation in Akiba wouldn't change so easily. However, Minori was optimistic.

Shiroe is dashing, so that won't be a problem.

This was sheer personal preference, but Minori seemed to have let that slip past her entirely. There was also the question of whether this "dashing Shiroe" Minori mentioned was a maidenly delusion, but there was no one to answer it.

In general, at this point in time, there was no one who was particularly concerned with the identity of the emotion inside Minori.

Nobody knew whether it was trust for a guardian, a pastel adoration, or something more definite.

This was because even Minori, the person in question, hadn't given a name to what she felt.

► 2

Meanwhile, Akatsuki had noticed her own symptoms.

Like Minori, she'd retired to her room. She was sitting on the tatami, as silent as a figurine, but internally, she was badly shaken.



When she sat like this, kneeling formally on a floor cushion, Akatsuki looked adorable. Her long, glossy black hair spread out behind her, and her small, seated shape had the air of a small, elegant animal about it.

However, even if she was short, she was a university student. The amount of information she had was decidedly different from what Minori, a middle schooler, had. The fact that she couldn't state positively that her amount of *experience* was different made Akatsuki sad, but she was fully aware of that fact, and it made her agitation all the more violent.

Why do I have to feel pressured by a middle schooler?!

Akatsuki writhed in agony, hugging her knees.

On top of having no experience with romance, she had many uncalled-for complexes, and there was no possible way she could keep her cool under the circumstances. Self-control didn't accumulate as easily as age did.

It was all because she was short. That was the root of the trouble.

Akatsuki heaved a big sigh and thought back, touching her bangs with a fingertip.

Things had been fine when she was in elementary school. She'd been an elementary schooler who looked like an elementary schooler.

Then she'd become a middle schooler who looked like an elementary schooler.

Even in high school, she'd been no more than a high school student who looked like an elementary schooler.

When she started college, people had finally begun mistaking her for a middle schooler, but by that time, she no longer had the energy to talk back.

She didn't think her appearance was all that bad, but in any case, she had no experience with love. The only people who approached her were men with certain interests who'd gotten the wrong idea. You couldn't even hope to date in an environment like that.

Of course, she had had someone confess to her seriously. *But.*

That was...

Akatsuki's shoulders slumped.

The year she'd started university, a neighborhood middle schooler had told her he liked her. He seemed to be under the impression that she was a middle schooler from another district. She'd turned him down, of course, but it had been such a shock that she'd come down with a fever, and even now, the psychological trauma remained.

That said, it wasn't as though Akatsuki herself had wanted

romance no matter what. Of course, as a woman of a certain age, she'd been interested in boyfriend-girlfriend relationships, but she hadn't been so desperate she would have fallen for just *anyone*. She'd thought that adoration without a definite object was foolish.

What Akatsuki was starved for was a much drier relationship, one built on abilities. Her cute looks and short stature meant she'd been treated as a mascot at all times, wherever she went. Even at home, her own little sister had treated *her* like a little sister.

For that reason, she'd idolized “partner,” “collaborator,” and “colleague” relationships. If not those, then “subordinate” or “follower” would have been fine. The sort of relationship where each acknowledged the other's skills and made up for the other's shortcomings.

After all, no one had ever treated her that way.

She was a hard worker, and when she was working toward a goal she was determined to reach, she had an earnestness that was capable of single-minded focus and dogged effort. However, because of her adorable appearance, that effort had never had a chance to be evaluated fairly. That was why, in the world of *Elder Tales*, she'd pretended to be a taciturn male Assassin.

Even that only lasted until the Catastrophe, though.

That horrible incident had changed everything.

In the midst of that hellish chaos, her one stroke of luck had been her connection to Shiroe. Shiroe, and after him, Naotsugu and Nyanta. Then Log Horizon, the guild she could call home.

In *Elder Tales*, after it had become another world, Akatsuki had gained true friends—something she'd never managed to make on Earth—for the first time. Human relationships in which people didn't make fun of Akatsuki for her short stature or make a pet of her.

Of course, she was still treated like a mascot sometimes.

Her looks were a part of her, so that probably wouldn't change in the future, either. There was no help for it, and she'd grown able to permit it. This was because she knew that, in this world, skills and abilities could be seen just as clearly as appearance.

The fact that these were shown in a clear way to those who looked for them—the fact that level existed—had been welcome news for Akatsuki.

In parties, if she pursued her own role seriously, she could win respect from everyone. There were lots of frightening and painful things here, but Akatsuki thought in that one respect, this other world was wonderful.

When Shiroe had given her his Appearance Reset Potion just after the Catastrophe, she'd called him “my liege” because she'd wanted to

repay him. She'd insisted on being his subordinate, because she wanted her skills to be acknowledged.

No matter what, she hadn't wanted to be saved for free because she was a little girl.

However, Shiroe had been an even better liege than Akatsuki had imagined. His open-mindedness, the certainty of his tactics, and the strength of will to foresee a range of events so vast it was beyond Akatsuki's imagination and then in turn to *choose* a future from it: Being able to be Shiroe's partner was affirming.

On top of that, Shiroe had an ideal flaw: his combat abilities.

At the very least, his attack power was so low that he couldn't put an end to a battle. Akatsuki was able to assist Shiroe on that point, and he also seemed to acknowledge her craftsmanlike plays.

As a modern person, risking her life in battles with monsters frightened her, but she had studied kendo when she was little, and it was nothing she couldn't overcome. At the very least, it seemed far better than the humiliation of never being treated like a full person no matter where she went.

To a bystander, she might have seemed like a ninja who didn't have a shred of loyalty, but to Akatsuki herself, there was reason enough behind her actions to suit her own objectives. ...Though, of course, there was a strong component of hiding her embarrassment within her actions as well.

It didn't seem to have taken much time for that feeling to deepen beyond trust. Even Akatsuki didn't know what had triggered it or when it had started, but being near Shiroe was slightly embarrassing and pleasant.

Maybe it's because of the griffin?

When she remembered what it was like to ride on its back, her face softened.

The feeling of acceleration, as if she was plummeting straight down in the midst of strong wind and thrills. Spending that time clinging to Shiroe's back or wrapped snugly in his arms gave Akatsuki a powerful feeling of excitement and comfort.

It might be what people called the suspension bridge effect, but it charmed Akatsuki so much she didn't care.

At this point, just being close to Shiroe made her happy for no reason. She was so hooked that she'd gotten serious about practicing silent walking and sneaking up behind him.

It embarrassed Akatsuki to give that feeling a name, even if it was just inside her mind, but in a word, it was affection. Akatsuki was aware that it was the sort of affection that had to do with the opposite

sex.

That said, Akatsuki would have been perfectly happy never to realize this.

What she'd wanted was the partner seat. To be respected and acknowledged as a comrade. Even if she felt affection, there was no need for that affection to be returned in kind. Most of all, Akatsuki had noticed that comfort only recently.

Just having this feeling growing inside her, like a vibrant flower or silent music, made her days overflow with happiness.

...But then Minori had appeared.

She had no grudge against Minori herself. Minori was earnest and considerate, intelligent and hardworking, and there wasn't an atom of her that was worthy of reproach. Akatsuki thought she was a good companion and an adorable junior member. What depressed her was her own bad luck.

...Or was it good luck?

She'd escaped from the prejudice of being seen as a middle schooler and encountered a friend who, at the very least, seemed likely to see her as a person in her own right. Her feelings had been stirred by that friend. That was a good thing. A very fortunate thing. Akatsuki somehow knew that at the very least, that friend didn't dislike her, either. The experience was exhilarating.

However, the rival who'd appeared at that point had been an actual middle schooler. What ill-starred fate was this?

Rrgh... Am I really that much of a Loli staple?

It made Akatsuki want to throw a cushion and Assassinate it.

Come to think of it, that might not be...too bad. Maybe.

Akatsuki had a complex about her looks. She might be cute, but it was a mascot kind of cuteness, and she couldn't rid herself of the doubt that no one would ever see her as a candidate for romance. In that sense, it might be a good thing that Minori was her rival. After all, the other girl was an actual middle schooler. She wouldn't have a handicap as far as figure went. That said, the idea made her feel as if she'd never escape the middle-schooler category, no matter how far she went.

When her thoughts had taken her that far, Akatsuki abruptly raised her head.

Earlier, she'd felt as if she'd been issued a challenge, and since she'd had the same flyer, she'd taken it out on reflex, because she'd been riled. However, would this be a date? If so, there were probably things she'd need to do to get ready.

Suddenly ill at ease, Akatsuki began to fidget on her floor cushion.

If it was a date, wouldn't she have to dress properly? Impossible! Akatsuki shook her head. It really was "Impossible!": The only clothes Akatsuki had were as black as black oxide. On Earth, in order to function in society, she'd had a few feminine outfits, but in the world of *Elder Tales*, all she had were dark-colored Assassin clothes.

As a ninja who served Shiroe, there hadn't been a problem with that, and she hadn't needed anything else.

However, it really wouldn't be a good idea to wear them on a date.

Wait, what if I went as a ninja accompanying my liege on his incognito outing?

Akatsuki nodded. Shiroe was going to go eat free cake. In that situation, she'd have to go along as his bodyguard whether she wanted to or not. *Phew*, she thought, but immediately shook her head violently. No matter how she thought about it, it wouldn't work. After all, she was the one who'd dragged the bewildered Shiroe out, impelled by a feeling of rivalry toward Minori.

If, tomorrow, she were to say, "You wanted to go eat, didn't you, my liege? I'll guard you," Shiroe would look at her as if she were someone to be pitied. If worse came to worst, he might even be disgusted with her.

In that case, I could have Henrietta coordinate something...

She considered that idea as well, but she was reluctant. Even if she put up with being petted and fawned over this time, Henrietta's extremely girlish taste would be a problem. It might be all right in other situations, but Minori was a real middle schooler, and she'd be at too much of a disadvantage against her in little-girlish clothes like those.

In the end, if she needed to get some sort of outfit ready, it would probably be safest to pick it out herself.

On that thought, Akatsuki sprang to her feet.

Outside the window, the rain gently enfolded Akiba, but the evening was still light enough.

If she went to the central plaza, she should find for sale lots of the handmade clothes that were all the rage lately.

► 3

The town of Akiba was enveloped in slightly giddy commotion.

At this time, with the festival nearly upon them, the Adventurers

who would be exhibiting at the festival were hard at work getting ready, but the exhibitors weren't the only ones.

Even without looking at Akatsuki's and Minori's cases, if there was a festival being held, there would be people who wanted to do something at it. On top of that, this was a huge event that involved all of Akiba. It wasn't only players with production subclasses: All the Adventurers who lived in Akiba, and even the People of the Earth, were busy making preparations.

For example, those who intended to cook some sort of special dish on the day were looking for ingredients, and those who were planning banquets were buying up food and fruit. As a result, materials were running low, which meant traveling merchants were welcomed, and the number of Adventurers who went hunting in hopes of getting drop items skyrocketed. And like Akatsuki and Minori, female Adventurers were thinking about buying stylish clothes.

Even without going that far, work to remove rubble and expand the plaza was being conducted in Akiba to coincide with the festival, and officially authorized work quests from the Round Table Council were issued day after day. At the very least, it was Japanese human nature to think that one should clean the entryway and walls of one's own guild house at times like these.

Jobs for Carpenters and furniture artisans increased, and the workshops bustled for days on end.

Even in Akiba, the busiest place was the Production Guild Liaison Committee, and at its center was Calasin, guild master of Shopping District 8.

Swearing all the while that he'd been cursed several different ways, Calasin continued to field telechats.

Calasin thought that, although he'd always liked talking to people and had many acquaintances, he'd never dreamed he'd be this swamped with inquiries: So many telechats were coming his way without a break that he was unable to leave the room. It was all the fault of that young man with glasses and unpleasant eyes.

Although the Adventurers of Akiba called them the three major production guilds, the truth was a bit different.

Shopping District 8 hadn't originally been a production guild. It had been a chat guild.

Just as the word implied, *chat* meant "talking." When this world was still a game, there had been a certain number of users who had used the game to chat. They'd adventured, too, of course; they'd also leveled up, collected items, and produced things. However, they'd done so because it gave them things to talk about with each other. To

them, the game's greatest pleasure had been chatting.

Elder Tales' noisiest time had been from eight PM until the middle of the night—aka after dinner. During that time, many users had logged on for a leisurely chat with their friends.

These “chatter” fans were the polar opposite of “raiders,” who enjoyed the game's hard challenges.

Shopping District 8 was a guild created by chatters. The commerce was simply there to create opportunities for conversation. Shopping District 8 conducted business because it enjoyed entertaining customers.

They were somewhat different from the Roderick Trading Company, which collected fantasy-class recipes and attempted to create rare items, and the Marine Organization, which had begun when Adventurers who'd ended up in production classes had begun to purchase materials as a group.

Naturally, as the leader of that guild, Calasin's position was different from that of either Roderick of the Roderick Trading Company or Michitaka of the Marine Organization. Calasin was no more than the leading member of the merchants affiliated with Shopping District 8. He wasn't a ruler with vast authority. He was its representative, its face, and he was respected by its members, but no one pledged their loyalty to him.

However, he *was* the leading member. The central figure of a guild of chatters. He had 980 names registered to his telechat list, a number very close to the system's limit.

Calasin was putting that contact network to good use and receiving reports in rapid succession.

“Aye-aye. Got it. I'll tell † Koumei. † ”

“Hm? Ah. That's probably too expensive, don't you think?”

“*Brzzzzt!* No, none of that, *thank* you. The Liaison Committee doesn't play favorites. You'll get the stall location you drew in the lottery. We expect strict compliance.”

Even as he switched between telechats, Calasin was quickly jotting down several notes on the papers in front of him.

The desk held an enormous amount of plans and applications. The disorder was just as bad as it was in Shiroe's office.

“Hey.”

“Ah, Michitaka.”

The huge man who'd entered the office was Michitaka. He was holding a bundle of papers under his arm. Setting them down on the

desk, he looked around the area.

“C’mon, now. You’re doing this all by yourself?”

At Michitaka’s words, Calasin laughed.

“Well, there’s no help for it. We’re like a jumbled mob of small merchants. With a festival like this one, everyone’s buying and selling like there’s no tomorrow, and it makes them want to join in, too.”

“Yeah, I guess it would.”

There was a scorched smell about Michitaka. He was a Blacksmith, and he’d probably come straight from his workshop. The Marine Organization was the leader—and the largest—of the production guilds in Akiba. Apparently its leader had been in the workshop himself.

“We’re more of a workshop than anything, see. Our job is to make good things and sell ’em, and we’re not so good at haggling and hawking. Well, we’ll leave that stuff to you. I’ll admit that, just for this fair, the festival mood is fun.”

In MMORPGs, there were several types of player who specialized in production. Some, like Calasin, had fun chatting with other players. Others, like Michitaka, mass-produced items in their workshops, enjoying the game as a production and sales sim. Then there were collectors who, like Roderick’s group, wanted to collect rare materials and recipes.

The Libra Festival, it seemed, involved a huge variety of production classes.

“Never mind that. You okay?” Michitaka asked.

“No, not at all. Well, I guess there’s no way around being short-handed.”

With a disgusted expression, Calasin gestured behind him.

There were items of every variety imaginable back there packed into crates, and at a glance, there seemed to be several dozen crates. It was a veritable mountain of junk that reached the ceiling. They were all prototypes of items that would be for sale, collected from Libra Festival participants.

They’d asked for submissions with the intent of making sure there were no dangerous items, but the result had been a washout. With this many items submitted across such a wide range, there was no way Calasin could check them all by himself. Actually, even if he’d had ten people on it, it was doubtful whether they would have made it in time.

“Wow. That’s—”

“—impossible, no?”

“Impossible for sure.”

Calasin and Michitaka nodded together.

It really couldn't be done.

"Well, no help for it. That idea blew up in the hangar. Just gonna leave 'em?"

"We'll probably have to. You know, it might be hell starting tomorrow."

Calasin, who was past desperate, answered cheerily. At this point in time, this was all it was. However, the fact that it was at all held a definite warning. The Libra Festival had begun to swell to a size far greater than Calasin or Michitaka imagined.

Calasin and Michitaka did register that trend, quite clearly.

As a matter of fact, all the guild masters on the Round Table Council had noticed the signs to some extent. However, the pace at which it was swelling was faster than they'd anticipated.

Calasin, in the heart of the Libra Festival at the Production Guild Liaison Committee office, first sensed the impending crisis on the night before the festival.

That said, at this point in time, even Calasin failed to notice the focused malice.

► 4

Viewed from the outside, the record Shiroe had accumulated probably looked spectacular.

For example, in the days of the Debauchery Tea Party, he'd given strategies to a group of individual players who hadn't even formed a guild, and out of the whole Japanese server, that little group of comrades had managed to conquer the Hades' Breath raid at a fairly early stage. Among players who knew the circumstances, that achievement was held in extraordinarily high regard.

The Debauchery Tea Party—which had pioneered combat on huge raids that had gone down in the history of the server, such as Radamanteus's Throne and the Nine Great Gaols of Halos, even though they were only a small group—had become a legend of sorts.

In addition, those in the know were aware that the sequence of events surrounding the establishment of the Round Table Council had been Shiroe's doing. When it came to huge, critical strategies, the war record of Shiroe the Strategist positively shone.

However, that was only when the results were seen from the outside. To Shiroe himself, those were only a fraction of countless battles. Of the battles he'd fought, there were many that hadn't been big, and many where advance investigation had been useless. If those battles were added to the statistics, was his percentage of victories

really all that high? That was how he thought about it.

Shiroe didn't have a very high opinion of his abilities as a strategist.

I'm probably going to bring my win rate down again today...

For a while now, Shiroe had been feeling vaguely uncomfortable, and as he thought, he tried his best not to attract attention.

"Quit fidgeting, my liege."

"That's right, Shiroe. It's a shame; you look so good."

"Grr."

"Huh? He...does look good, doesn't he?"

"My liege is my liege. Looks don't matter."

However, reality was heartless.

The two girls who sat on either side of Shiroe wouldn't let him lie low.

On Shiroe's right sat a girl whose body, which had the slimness of her years, was wrapped in an intelligent aura. This was Minori, Log Horizon's Kannagi.

Today, she looked even more feminine than usual in a long denim skirt, an off-white blouse and a beige-pink cardigan. She seemed a bit like an upper-class young lady, but Minori tended to take care of people, and the look suited her very well. When the light shone through it, her black hair turned the color of dark chocolate, and as expected, the way she wore it tied up with a black lace ribbon was sweet.

On Shiroe's left was an old friend: Akatsuki, the self-proclaimed ninja, whose sense of loyalty was a bit of a mystery. Akatsuki's black hair, which was glossier than ever, hung loose, and she was staring fixedly up at Shiroe with eyes that were as dead serious as always.

What was different was that she wasn't dressed all in black. She wore a lilac *kofurisode*—a kimono-style top short enough to allow for a separate type of bottom—and she paired it with a pair of indigo *hakama*-style trousers. The costume gave her the air of a university student, and on the beautiful, slightly feline Akatsuki, it looked almost too good.

Akatsuki was a girl so lovely that if you asked a hundred people whether she was beautiful, all one hundred would tell you she was, while Minori had definite future potential. Under the circumstances, one could really say he had "a flower in each hand."

However, as he sat between those two, Shiroe looked a bit unwell.

He couldn't have said what was wrong, or what the reason was,

but his discomfort was real.

They were very near the center of Akiba, at a special café that had been set up in the large intersection. Shiroe was sitting here at the request of the two girls.

Prompted by his innately cautious nature, Shiroe had investigated the cake buffet in advance. The preliminaries for the buffet were being held several times. He could probably have gone with Akatsuki, and again with Minori, at different times.

However, Shiroe would have felt bad about trying his luck at a free event twice. Even if it was a festival, wouldn't that have made him like the kid who eats all the samples in the samples corner? On that thought, Shiroe had come up with a plan.

If Akatsuki and Minori wanted to go enjoy cake, then the three of them could just go together. If the quota for two people was eight pieces of cake, and the three of them ate their way through twelve pieces, there shouldn't be a problem.

Fortunately, the guild master of Danceteria, the guild that was presiding over the cake buffet, had come to negotiate with the Round Table Council several times. If memory served, she was a woman with an artisan's temperament who was friends with Henrietta.

When he went to ask for permission, Madame Kanako, the Danceteria guild master, had welcomed Shiroe. No doubt the bright smile she'd worn when she received him had been because he was a member of the Round Table Council, but it hadn't inconvenienced Shiroe at all, so he hadn't hesitated to ask for permission.

He'd said he wanted to attend with two girls from his guild, and asked if they could strike a deal with twelve pieces of cake.

Madame Kanako had been startled at first. Then she'd narrowed her already narrow eyes even further in a smile, and had asked him for all the details of the situation. The circumstances weren't so important that they needed to be spread around, but there also wasn't any particular need to hide them. Log Horizon acknowledged itself to be a very open-minded guild.

As the result of his explanation, the guild master, whose smile was now extremely bright, had agreed to let the three of them participate together. The worldly wise way she'd smiled had bothered him a little, but the doubt was minor enough, and the convenience to himself great enough, that he'd been able to ignore it. That was how Shiroe had gotten special permission for the three of them to attend the cake buffet together.

...And so Shiroe and the others were at the open café, waiting for their cake to arrive, but Shiroe had already begun to get a mild

stomachache.

Since he hadn't eaten a single bite yet, it probably wasn't heartburn from the food.

It was probably because, although Minori and Akatsuki weren't on bad terms as a rule, they were both exuding an oddly tense, prickly atmosphere.

When he'd reported via telechat that the three of them would be able to go together and told them not to worry, Minori had been one thing, but when Akatsuki responded, her tone had been rather odd. Shiroe thought the reason probably had something to do with ninja loyalty, but he didn't really get it.

On the other hand, Minori was full of enthusiasm. She'd been cheerfully striking up conversations with Shiroe for a while now, and her attitude was so energetic and positive that it startled him. Minori had always been a hard worker, and Shiroe thought it was cute—and very much like a middle schooler—that she was looking forward to cake this way.

However, Akatsuki kept fiddling with her *hakama* and shooting glances at Shiroe, and taking terribly practical-looking *kunai* out of who knew where, so that, for the past few minutes, Shiroe had been having an awful time scolding her.

When he looked around, he saw there were about twenty pairs of men and women, each sitting at their own little table, smiling and talking.

At dusk in October, the wind was cool. The open café was illuminated by orange lamplight, and its atmosphere was peaceful and friendly. Bards might have been playing somewhere: A slightly old-fashioned pop song from Earth mingled with the wind, and the sound was nostalgic.

Absently, Shiroe thought that most of the pairs sitting at the other tables might be couples.

It had already been five months since the Catastrophe. True, this was another world, but that might be enough time for strangers to become acquaintances, and then friends, or even lovers.

In a corner of his mind, Shiroe did think, *Hey, come on! Do you know just how crazy these past five months have been? You can't possibly have had that much free time. We've had an emergency on our hands! On the opposite side, though, another voice said, No, but wait: Young couples' love might burn brighter precisely because this is such a world of thrills and suspense.*

Personally, Shiroe didn't know much about love, and he'd never had a clearly acknowledged girlfriend.

For that reason, he couldn't declare that even under these

circumstances, love was possible or it wasn't possible, but it was, in the best sense of the word, nothing to do with him. If the people in question were both happy, then it was fine, and he concluded that there was no need to pursue the issue.

When one was only watching them, couples were heartwarming, and Shiroe didn't dislike them. He'd rather not hear someone gush incessantly about their lover or have them ask him for advice on romance, but looking at them from a distance made him feel warm. And so, now as well, Shiroe watched them absently.

"My liege. My liege!"

"Oh, um. Sorry. What is it, Akatsuki?"

When he turned back to Akatsuki—who was far more restless than usual today—she was fidgeting. "Why are you making that dumb face? It's sloppy," she said.

From his other side, Minori proclaimed, "That's right. Show some spirit!" Shiroe thought it was weird to talk about showing spirit at a cake buffet, but when he tried to tell her so, Minori's serious expression kept the words from coming out.

Minori certainly seemed to be showing spirit.

She clenched her hands in front of her chest, flexing her muscles in a tiny fist pump. The gesture made her look adorable, like some kind of animated character. When she made her sweet expression as serious as she possibly could and said, "Let's do our best!" instead of looking dignified, it looked more as if she was trying to do something that was a bit beyond her, and, rather than encouraging Shiroe, it made him want to smile.

It really was a mystery.

"Umm..."

"Grr."

"Miss Akatsuki, that traditional outfit is lovely."

As he was searching for something to say, Minori started a conversation for him. She probably hadn't done it to help him out, but Shiroe was grateful to have been given a topic.

"Those really are amazing. It's rare to see you in Japanese clothes, Akatsuki. What happened?"

"Do they look strange on me?"

Akatsuki's face looked troubled, but also as though she was putting up a brave front, and the two of them told her "No, not at all" in unison. The pattern on the pale lilac kimono—a scattering of Chinese bellflowers—was subdued, but when petite Akatsuki wore it, it looked so good it might as well have been made for her. In general, she was a taciturn, lovely girl who seemed a bit like a small animal, but in this kimono, she was particularly gorgeous.

“Miss Akatsuki, you look awfully good in traditional clothes.”

“It’s just like grad—”

“Don’t say ‘It’s like a graduation ceremony.’”

“*Erk.*”

Akatsuki had cut him off at the pass, and Shiroe found himself at a loss for words. Glaring at him, Akatsuki muttered, “Even if it’s you, my liege, I’ll kick you. With my knee,” but when Shiroe and Minori kept repeating that they really did look good on her, her mood must have finally improved, because she let him off the hook.

“Yours look good on you, too, Minori.”

At that, the middle-school girl smiled shyly.

Apparently, Isuzu had coordinated her outfit for her. When she explained in detail about where the blouse and cardigan had each been purchased, and how much they’d cost, and what Isuzu had said when she’d picked them out, she looked as if she was enjoying herself. Even Akatsuki, who had been stiff at first, seemed to have grown interested: She was listening, holding on to Shiroe’s sleeve.

Seeing this, Shiroe finally relaxed a bit.

Advance investigation, strategy... They just aren’t any help when women are involved.

It had been that way in the Debauchery Tea Party, too. For example, with incidents or discussions in which the female Adventurers Nazuna and Yomi were involved, no matter how much advance investigating he did or how well he laid groundwork, he’d never seemed to end up with good results.

That said, it wasn’t as though it had caused any major trouble. Most of the time, things faded out before anyone was aware of it, or the problem itself turned out not to have existed—incomprehensible and disappointing results for a strategist.

She was different, though, Shiroe remembered. Just her.

She had been the founder of the Debauchery Tea Party, and—technically—its leader. The *technically* was there because the Debauchery Tea Party had been a group of free spirits, and because, as a rule, everyone in it had been able to look after themselves.

To borrow Nyanta’s words, it had probably been the case that everyone knew what they had to do in order to make a comfortable place for themselves. As a result, they hadn’t needed a leader in the ordinary sense of the word.

Even so, she’d been the leader simply because she was the most willful member of the Tea Party. In a way, she’d always yanked the Debauchery Tea Party around.

Saying she wanted to see the midnight sun in Iceland, for example. She said some awful things like they were nothing...

Her willfulness had been global, and as a result Shiroe’s war

record had gotten worse and worse. There had been no “vague results” or “fade-outs under the cover of...” Most of the time, they’d died in action. The time when she’d gone on an expedition to the European server, taking everyone who wanted to go with her, but had lost the quest item so that they’d been unable to get into the Aurora Zone... That had been really exhausting. Shiroe wasn’t a worrywart for nothing.

Compared to that, Akatsuki’s and Minori’s requests had been positively cute. If things went on this way, Shiroe thought, their wishes just might come true.

► 5

“Oh, that looks delicious!”

As she watched the service begin, Minori’s eyes were round. Although they hadn’t yet come to Shiroe’s group, adorable shortcakes were being brought out to the tables. The strawberries were a bright, splendid color.

The Danceteria guild members had said, modestly, that they weren’t nearly as magnificent as cake shop products back on Earth, but from what he saw, that probably wasn’t the case. It wasn’t just their appearance: The light, sweet fragrance that drifted from them whetted his appetite.

“My liege, my liege. This looks fairly promising, doesn’t it?”

“Aren’t they pretty?! Oh, this is exciting!”

With a girl in high spirits on either side of him, Shiroe also began to enjoy himself, just a little. Possibly because he’d had a busy day, he thought he’d be able to polish off four cakes of that size without any trouble at all. Minori and Akatsuki probably felt the same way. None of the three of them had the slightest doubt that they would be able to finish everything. Not until that moment, that is.

Waitresses in café costumes continued serving, and several varieties of shortcake had been set out on almost every table. When it was finally Shiroe’s table’s turn, the guild master herself appeared, her face wreathed in smiles, personally carrying out a silver tray.

The silver tray held whole cakes. Strawberry, apricot, chocolate, cheese, black current/yogurt and apple pie, and a slightly early mont blanc.

Twelve cakes.

However, they were twelve *whole* cakes.

“Hmn?”

Minori looked puzzled, but Akatsuki's expression had already tensed.

"What's...?"

In response to Shiroe's questioning look, the Danceteria guild master beamed.

"Compliments of our guild, sir."

"No, I mean, I think there's too much..."

"We're very considerate here, sir."

She steamrolled him with a smile, then set dessert after dessert on the little table. The first was apple pie. A young Person of the Earth girl dressed as a waitress said, "I'll serve it for you," and sliced it. Once cut into eight equal pieces, the circle was transformed into the usual, familiar triangles, but it was one whole pie.

Of course there was no way that many cakes would fit on a small café table, so a wagon was hastily brought out, parked by the table, and loaded up with whole cakes. Eight of the varieties were the same as what all the other participants had, but four special types seemed to have been added. These were decorated with little dolls made out of sugar candy: a man flanked by two women.

"Shiroe..."

"My liege..."

Of course, as they watched the apple pie being cut up in front of them, the two girls wore strained expressions as well. The apple pie looked delicious, and if he'd had four about this size, Shiroe was confident he'd have been able to eat them all. If the other two said, in that way girls had, *We're full already*, he was even prepared to take one piece from each of them and eat six.

He knew from experience that when women pretended to have small appetites that way, it was camouflage, but *she* had drummed into him the idea that it was a guy's duty to accept the ruse at face value.

Even so, he could handle only five or six pieces. These cakes had been brought out to them whole, so in simple terms, the amount had octupled. Not only that, but the crazed dance of round cakes in front of him struck Shiroe with an impact that was more than just numbers.

"Well, for starters, should we have a piece?"

At Shiroe's haphazard words, which had no goal other than buying time, the three of them began to eat the sole pie.

Delicious. The brisk sweetness of the plentiful apples and the faint fragrance of cinnamon were pleasant. As he savored the soft, moist apples, he polished off a piece easily.

Just when Shiroe was on the verge of embracing a naïve hope—*You know, this just might...*—the remaining five-eighths of the apple

pie were set down in front of him.

By Akatsuki.

“Oh, *c'mon!* Why?!”

“I’m serving you, my liege.”

“Serving? That’s the whole thing!”

“Ah! I’m sorry. I’ll cut it!”

That hadn’t been what he’d meant. The instant he tried to check Minori, Minori was already on her feet, leaning over, and had begun to dexterously cut up the apple pie with a knife. Her expression was serious, and every time she moved the knife, her hair with its black ribbon swung nearer Shiroe’s ear, giving off a faint, sweet scent.

Oh, even if she’s in middle school, I guess she is a girl, he thought, and just then, from here and there around the café, he began to hear mutters: *Die, No Lolita lovers allowed, I hope yours falls off, Break your glasses*, and on and on.

Akatsuki looked mystified. When he slid his gaze to the side, written on the decorated cakes in clumsy letters were: “Two isn’t fair, you know.” “I hope yours falls off, Mr. Lolita Complex ♥,” “Two-Timing Tastiness.”

Aaaaaaah?!

At that point, for the first time, Shiroe accurately understood the situation.

A minefield.

The instant he got it, that word popped up in his mind. Shiroe, Akatsuki, and Minori were in the middle of a minefield, littered with mines in the form of misinterpretations from the people around them. It wasn’t only Shiroe’s reputation; two of his precious guild members were being targeted by the same prejudice.

Not good! If this keeps up, they’ll both get dragged in. And people think I’m a strategist... This is pathetic. For now, we have to leave the café unobtrusively, without causing a fuss, keeping the damage to a minimum, then regroup, or else...

Shiroe examined countermeasures, his brain spinning at high speed.

Since he didn’t know how far the misunderstanding had spread, and it wasn’t even clear where the situation had begun, even if he grasped the situation, he couldn’t bring it under control. In that sense, Shiroe couldn’t even shift into controlled encounter mode. Akatsuki held a fork out to him.

“My liege, here.”

On its tines sat a cute, bite-sized piece of apple pie.

“You want me to eat that?”

Akatsuki nodded. *You’re shoving the rest off onto me?!* he almost

shot back, but her large black eyes were watching him steadily, and he found himself unable to retort. Akatsuki always dressed plainly, but today she was wearing an imitation-bellflower hair ornament. That only made it harder.

Shiroe was scowling, fighting embarrassment. Akatsuki tilted her head slightly, looking perplexed, then pushed the fork she held in her right hand toward him.

“Eat, my liege.”

She held it out to him, but to Shiroe, this was a big problem.

As far as the world was concerned, eating from a fork someone held out to you meant they were having you say, “Aaaah.” One look at Akatsuki’s sulky, too-serious face made it clear that the act didn’t stem from affection, but the people around them probably wouldn’t understand that.

If this kept up, he’d be disgraced as a guy with a Lolita complex.

If he stepped on this land mine, forget losing a leg; he might lose his whole lower body. The looks he was getting from the people around him already hurt. On top of that, this was an open café, and it was the biggest event of the first night of the festival, so they were getting cold looks from people on the street as well.

“Come on, it’s going to fall.”

Still, when the slipping fragment was forced on him, he had to take it. Stealthy giggles from the people around him and the image of fingers being pointed at him rose in his mind, and Shiroe wished the ground would open up and swallow him.

“Shiroe!”

When Shiroe turned around, even Minori had cut a tiny sliver of golden pie and was holding it out to him, eyes sparkling. When confronted with a look of innocent expectation from someone nine whole years his junior, he couldn’t treat her coldly.

No matter how you look at it, they’re both far too clueless about this situation. I’m telling you, now is the time to beat a retreat. We’re making a spectacle of ourselves!

“Is it good?”

“Of course it is, isn’t it, my liege.”

“Yes, it’s good, but listen. ...The matter’s gone beyond that level, don’t you think?”

He tried retorting, but the couples around them were also doing the “Aaaaah” thing. He’d vaguely suspected as much, but seeing the reality with his own eyes this way completely shattered Shiroe.

Apparently, the town of Akiba was more filled with love than he’d thought.

If he assumed most of the giggling whispers were simply the playful sweet nothings of couples in love instead of ridicule aimed at Shiroe's group, they might still be saved. Shiroe tried to console himself with the thought, anyway, but of course it didn't solve the problem.

One advances through reality with an endless series of small steps. This was symbolized, unmistakably, by the cakes piled high in front of him.

► 6

Just as reality isn't something you can overcome simply by trying, it was only to be expected that Shiroe, Akatsuki, and Minori's attempt failed. If it had been three of them and twelve pieces of cake, they would have had a chance, but twelve whole cakes made it a completely different ballgame. Since their stomachs weren't magic bags, it wasn't possible.

The three of them had tried very hard, but even then, they'd topped out at eighteen pieces, or in other words, a little more than two whole cakes. Shiroe had been responsible for nine of those, and frankly, he felt so sick he didn't want to move.

Having lost the cake buffet battle, the three of them dejectedly returned to their guild house. Of course, since they hadn't been able to finish everything, it hadn't been free, so Shiroe had ended up paying for twelve whole cakes.

In terms of time, it was probably close to eight PM.

Shiroe was currently relaxing on the guild house's third-floor terrace. ...Or, more accurate, he was pinned there, his stomach so heavy that he didn't feel like moving.

They'd originally planned to wander around the festival and browse after their cake escapade, but Shiroe had felt as if the mass of cake was weighing his insides down, and he was thoroughly worn out. He wasn't in any shape for a walk, and so, even though Akatsuki and Minori fared a little better than him, they'd gone back to the guild house.

According to the blackboard in the dining area, Nyanta and Naotsugu were both out at the festival. Isuzu and Rundelhaus had written, "Taking dog for walk." They'd probably gone on a date.

Having confirmed this, Shiroe then went out onto the terrace and lay on a cedar bench by himself.

It was probably safe to say he was down for the count.

In any case, the world could be only what it was, and today,

Shiroe had lost.

You see? You just can't count on advance investigation.

Now that he thought about it, the Danceteria guild master really had been extraordinarily smiley back then. She'd probably already been planning to counterattack with whole cakes. True, it had *looked* as if he was tackling the event with a pretty girl on each arm, but they weren't in that sort of relationship. He didn't think they'd had any call to be so jealous.

And anyway, twelve whole cakes, just for going with Akatsuki and Minori? What sort of calculation was that? ...Oh. Wait.

Having hit on an idea, Shiroe set up a telechat. He was planning to tell Soujirou he should go to the cake buffet. The free buffet would be held at the open café at different times throughout the next day as well. Soujirou, his harem-prone former comrade, was sure to enjoy the event to the fullest.

On the other end of the telechat, Soujirou seemed to be spending time at the festival with his guild members. He couldn't tell what they were talking about, but behind the conversation with Soujirou, he could hear several feminine voices. Apparently, as usual, Soujirou was surrounded by "flowers."

Soujirou thanked Shiroe over and over for recommending the buffet. His trusting attitude did sting Shiroe's conscience a little, but an honest escort like himself had been mistaken for a two-timer and targeted by a whole-cake attack. He told himself an *actual* harem-believing being should be given appropriate treatment.

After switching off the telechat function, Shiroe leaned into the back of the bench and looked up at the sky, feeling just a little relieved.

Log Horizon's guild house had one extraordinary feature: An ancient tree pierced the building's floors, growing up through the roof. The old tree spread its branches wide over the building, and its crown enfolded the spaces where Shiroe and the others lived.

A blanket of green leaves gently swayed in the wind, jutting out like a roof over the terrace where Shiroe lay.

Possibly because of the festival, more lights than usual were lit along the wide avenue. The sun was long down, and the orange light that seeped from stores here and there cast a dreamlike illumination over sidewalks, along with the lamps that hung above the streets. The sidewalks were covered in green moss, and the buildings decorated with tree branches and ribbons.

The Log Horizon guild house was decorated just for the festival too, albeit modestly, with a green wreath and an orange ribbon.

Minori and Touya had probably done it.

I haven't been able to look after the guild much lately, Shiroe thought after ending his telechat with Soujirou.

Ordinarily, a guild master's most important job was running his guild. He was expected to manage things by having a complete grasp of the guild, accommodating member activities, and setting up and leading action plans.

However, circumstances at Log Horizon were a bit different from what they were at other guilds.

The first was their membership numbers. Log Horizon currently had eight members. In *Elder Tales*, there were six members in a standard party. That meant that if they formed a party from their eight guild members, no matter how they did it, two people would end up staying home.

There was also a sizable spread between member levels, and on top of that, they were split into two level tiers. The older members—Shiroe, Naotsugu, Nyanta, and Akatsuki—were all level 90, while the younger members—Minori, Touya, Rundelhaus, and Isuzu—were all currently around level 40.

It wasn't easy to organize a party across those two level groups.

In an average guild, the high-level players and the low-level players would probably have split up and gone around with players in their own level groups most of the time. That was how things naturally went.

However, Log Horizon's high-level group was made up entirely of veterans who were good at looking after people. Naotsugu and the others thought nothing of using the Coach System to put themselves on the same level as the low-level players, and thanks to them, their numbers went around well.

So, as far as leaders were concerned, they had a full, talented lineup.

Nyanta was an ideal adult, with the humor and patience necessary for instructing low-level players. Technically, the guild master should have taken the initiative in looking after these players on low-level adventures, but Nyanta did it perfectly, and he seemed to enjoy it.

Naotsugu had that aptitude as well. He was far more rough-and-ready than Nyanta, and he seemed suited to leading large groups. When newbies came from the Crescent Moon League to plan three-party joint hunting expeditions, Naotsugu was the one new players from other guilds admired most.

Although she was a poor talker and rather shy with strangers, Akatsuki had no problem with leading newbies, either. The newbies would go out hunting, bag some prey, and return home. During that

time, they would never see Akatsuki, but she would be constantly watching them and protecting them from high-level monsters. In her own way, she enjoyed being a leader.

In other words, Log Horizon had all the personnel it needed to lead and plan hunting expeditions, the things guild masters had to do at other guilds. That was what had enabled Shiroe to work exclusively on Round Table Council business in the first place.

However, although delegating guild master duties caused no issues with day-to-day operations, he couldn't say there were no problems when it came to human relations within the guild.

When he thought back on it, of all the high-level players, Shiroe had spent the least time with the new members. Of course, he shifted his schedule around so that he could have dinner at the guild house and work on cultivating friendships, but Shiroe sometimes noticed dubious looks, particularly from Rundelhaus and Isuzu—*Our guild master isn't a lazy hermit, is he?*—and he'd been thinking he needed to do something about it.

As far as the dignity of a guild master is concerned, Naotsugu and Captain Nyanta both have me beat... Even Soujirou manages his harem—I mean, his guild—like that.

It made Shiroe feel oddly sad. Of course, he couldn't take every role people wanted him to play, and the current situation was the result of assigning the right tasks to the right people, but he constantly felt as though he should spend more time with the Log Horizon members.

Shiroe thought that might have been the reason Akatsuki and Minori had gone out of their way to pull him outside.

This festival might be a good opportunity. The Round Table Council business... I guess I can't just drop it, but I'll cut back a bit. I need to make time to spend with everybody.

“My liege.”

Shiroe jumped.

As he thought about so many details, Akatsuki spoke to him—not loudly—from very close, startling him.

“What's the matter, Akatsuki?”

“Nothing, really...”

Akatsuki was wearing the same charming kimono-style top she'd worn earlier. She sat down quietly next to Shiroe. The cool, nocturnal October wind stroked their cheeks, and the sound of slow string music drifted up to them from the town.

“I hear music.”

“Oh. Mm-hmm. I...think it's probably the Seventh Marching Band. I heard they were holding a concert tonight.”

“I see.”

Sitting on the bench, Akatsuki stretched out her legs. The bench was low, and even though Akatsuki was short and sitting down, it looked as though she'd kicked her legs out in front of her. With her toes peeking out from the tail of her sober *hakama*, Akatsuki wiggled her ankles back and forth slightly. Shiroe spoke to her:

“You're kind of quiet.”

“I'm always quiet.”

“True, but...”

In this world, where electric loudspeakers hadn't yet been invented, concerts were limited to the actual volume of the performance. The melody the wind carried up to them still held hints of liveliness, but it was broken and distant.

Shiroe looked at Akatsuki.

The wind that brushed their faces had grown cold. In the midst of it, Akatsuki was gazing into the distance with her usual, unreadable expression.

“My liege.”

“Hm?”

“Do you...um.”

“Yes?”

Shiroe responded to Akatsuki politely. Although his small friend didn't say much, he knew she tended to pay attention to others' needs, so he didn't rush her.

“Do you not like cake?”

“.....”

Asking if he didn't like it, as though he hadn't been able to eat it all because he didn't like it, was problematic. He'd eaten nine whole pieces. Shiroe thought he'd put up a pretty good fight. Had there been some kind of misunderstanding?

“Or did you not have fun?”

“That wasn't it at all. Never mind that—I'm sorry. You won't get to go to the... What was it, the finals?”

“That doesn't matter. I didn't care about those. Minori was the one who cared.”

“I see.”

He didn't understand why Minori would care about an eating contest. Well, if it was necessary, Shiroe thought she'd probably tell him herself. Age-wise, Minori might be fourteen, but she was a thoughtful, responsible girl.

“But...”

“Hm?”

“Were you all right with that cake?”

Akatsuki had turned to look at Shiroe and was watching him steadily. As she stared at him, her striking black eyes gleamed wetly in her small face but conveyed no warmth. Her beauty added a sense of urgency.

“Huh?”

“No, I mean... You were really worked up over the all-you-can-eat free cake, weren’t you? Was three or four pieces enough?”

“I... I wasn’t really there for the cake, either.”

“No?”

“.....”

“It’s hard to keep a conversation going with you, my liege.”

“What am I supposed to do about it? And anyway, you’re the one who’s quiet, Akatsuki.”

Akatsuki had never been the talkative type.

When they were alone together, sometimes conversations just died. At first it had made him feel ill at ease, and he’d tried to come up with things to talk about, but by now, he was fine with just being silent like this. Maybe it was because, while Shiroe was fielding paperwork, Akatsuki often stayed in his room, erasing all traces of her presence, telling him she was on bodyguard duty. The way Akatsuki had spoken had been cute, so he’d answered as if he was teasing her, but they’d only recently become able to banter this way.

“That’s not true. I have all sorts of things to talk about.”

“Then give me something.”

“Hm?”

“A topic, I mean.”

Akatsuki scowled and fell silent.

Her gaze wandered unsteadily to the right, then swam back to the left.

Maybe she was at a loss. Had that been mean of him? Just as Shiroe had begun to wonder about that, Akatsuki spoke after a long pause.

“If you do this, it’s fun.”

Akatsuki’s open mouth was a funny shape, and it trembled restlessly, but she touched Shiroe’s forehead with a slender white fingertip.

“That’s fun?”

Akatsuki nodded.

I wonder if this is more Akatsuki-style master-servant role play... I really think she’s got the wrong idea here. Well, I don’t watch period dramas, so I don’t know either, but...

“I see.”

The wind rose, and the treetop swayed in the darkness with a

noise like the ocean. The scent of leaves in the midst of cool wind and stillness. Shiroe looked up at his own forehead, which Akatsuki was touching lightly, over and over. As she stroked his forehead, Akatsuki's lips were set in stubborn concentration. He had no idea what was fun about this, but "fun" was subjective. He thought there was probably no point in asking.

"You're okay with something like this?"

"It's your important job, my liege."

"Is that what it is?"

He'd spent a long time with Akatsuki.

The confusion after the Catastrophe, many battles, the journey to Susukino, the establishment of the Round Table Council, the political affair at the Ancient Court of Eternal Ice, and the conversation with Li Gan. Then the battle for Choushi, and Rundelhaus's revival.

Akatsuki had stuck with him through all of it, without a single complaint. He thought there had probably been battlefields he couldn't have gotten through without her support.

Remembering all of that, Shiroe continued to take this adorable abuse from the girl in the charming kimono.

► 7

She couldn't breathe.

It was as though the night air had become liquid: Her throat grew tight, hardening, and her blood became a muddy torrent, thundering in her ears.

If you do this, it's fun.

That's fun?

The whisper she'd overheard a moment ago was still there.

The sweet nothings from the black-haired girl, who was desperately trying to hide her embarrassment. The voice of her guild master, Shiroe: somewhat perplexed, yet still kind.

Her knees felt as if they'd turned to foam and were about to drain away. Fighting the sensation, Minori made for the kitchen. She was carrying dandelion barley tea, a digestive aid. She'd thought Shiroe might benefit from some, and so had taken a wooden tray up to the terrace. Still holding the tray, Minori walked mechanically.

She couldn't stay there. She mustn't watch that scene.

Her mind was chaos, as though it was filled with several thousand bursts of static, and she had no idea what was going on. It was as if her ethics had pushed her into motion, and it was all she could do to just put that place behind her.

The first thing she felt was shock. The next was an overwhelming confusion. She didn't have any clear question to ask, but doubt kept welling up inside her heart. She *wanted* to ask. However, she didn't know who she should ask, or even *what* to ask.

A feeling of being confused and wanting to be helped filled her chest, then seemed to descend into her abdomen, changing into something heavy and unpleasant.

Almost without being aware of it, Minori had returned to the kitchen. She set the tray on the dining table and sat down in a chair. She really didn't know why she felt so stunned.

Only, when she'd seen Shiroe and Akatsuki from the door to the third-floor terrace just now, she'd thought there had been something between them. At the very least, Akatsuki's expression had held special feelings for Shiroe.

When she'd noticed the older girl's longing—barely visible on the surface, yet still as clear as day—the shock had made Minori recoil as though she'd touched fire without realizing it.

That shock had made her run back here, to shelter.

Even as she sat here, she was disturbed by incoherent thoughts that blustered inside her mind like a sandstorm, and she couldn't pull together any questions that were remotely like questions.

At a loss, Minori gazed at the tabletop.

Her mind was completely bleached out. It was as if her thoughts had gone numb.

Time passed, quite a lot of it, and the first thought to surface was that Akatsuki was in love with Shiroe.

That's right. Akatsuki loves Shiroe.

It was a simple fact.

Today was sunny.

Autumn followed summer.

The guild house was covered in green.

It was a natural fact, just as clear as those, with no room for doubt.

It was a terribly obvious thing, but just murmuring it in her heart resurrected the shock she'd felt earlier, and the sandstorm threatened to cover her mind. That brief fact—only a few words—was broken down into phrases, drawn out, sliced up, grew crumpled and messy, and if she let her guard down, she felt she would be unable to grasp its meaning inside her mind.

Minori collected the scattered fragments of her thoughts and twisted them together, taking several deep, deep breaths.

The unpleasant feeling between her chest and her stomach seemed to have acquired a physical form, and she couldn't seem to get enough oxygen. Even her heartbeat seemed to be suppressed, and she could

feel her temperature falling.

In the midst of the anxiety of not being able to breathe the way she wanted to, and from an uneasiness as though her spine was being slowly skewered from behind, Minori finally came face-to-face with it:

I love Shiroe, too.

This was the first love she'd known, and it didn't taste faintly of lemons.

It was dark and painful right from the beginning, and it smelled like burnt iron.

All the joints in her body loosened, shaking as if they'd fly apart every which way. In the midst of this, Minori confronted something about which nothing could be done. She hadn't felt so powerless since the night Touya spent in the Intensive Care Unit.

She was only sitting there, but she felt as if she might scream something and break into a run; it hurt to restrain herself. She'd been raised with Touya, her twin, and while she'd helped her little brother, whose legs wouldn't work anymore, even she'd come to think she had a calm, responsible personality.

She'd never known she could have feelings so intense she couldn't handle them.

I love Shiroe.

Just thinking it made pain run through her, as though her heart were being crushed by steel claws. It was far too fearless; it seemed almost as if she'd forgotten her own place. It was the pain of her terror at her own conceit.

However, it was also true that a speck of sweetness had crept into the pain somehow.

The sweetness wasn't a premonition of happiness, the idea that she might be united with Shiroe.

It was more like the tempting compulsion to confirm the heat of the blood that flowed from a wound, even though you knew touching the wound would hurt. The lure of the stinging wound was a degenerate one, but even so, it was the sweetness of the pain of the first love she'd known.

Minori couldn't think of a single reason why Shiroe would choose her, but she could think of dozens—or even hundreds—of reasons why he wouldn't.

For that reason, the sweetness might have been given to Minori as an anesthetic.

The age difference. The difference in their talents. The difference in their business abilities. The difference in their combat capabilities. Her own immaturity. Her timidity. Her wretchedness. Even in terms of

appearance, she was mediocrity itself compared to Akatsuki... In short, Minori was a perfectly ordinary middle schooler, nothing more.

Then there was her own ugliness, which she'd just discovered.

Minori had thought this when Akatsuki touched Shiroe:

Not fair.

That's my place.

There had been no reason for it. It had been simple selfishness. When it came right down to it, it had only been a false accusation. Of course it had been. Akatsuki was free to fall in love with somebody, too.

Even so, Minori had thought *Not fair* because, somewhere in her heart, she'd thought of Shiroe as hers.

When she'd been Hamelin's captive, during that long, painful, lightless time, Shiroe had encouraged her. Shiroe had rescued her from her captivity. She'd idolized him as the star she should aim for and had tried to follow in his footsteps. That was what Shiroe was, and on some level, Minori had thought of him as hers.

I thought Shiroe would always be there... I thought he'd always be my teacher.

What arrogance.

The thought of her own contemptible ugliness made Minori feel as though her insides were smeared with mud. Viscous flames were slowly roasting her from the inside, as if heavy oil had been set on fire. The pain made her want to thrash around, but even if she screamed, it wouldn't help.

It hurt. She hated it.

And what was more, the realization that she'd had these emotions hidden inside made her dizzy.

The impudence of thinking of Shiroe as *hers*, of all things, as if she had some sort of right of ownership to him... She hated that conceited self so much she wanted to kill it. More than anything, she was appalled by her own unconscious arrogance, the arrogance that she hadn't even realized existed until just a moment ago.

"Not fair"...? Why would I... That's just—

A long time passed.

In the darkness, Minori continued to breathe, bearing up under pain that felt like she was being slowly ground down or ripped apart. As always, the air was clammy and heavy, as painful as a lump of sand.

For such a long time she didn't know how many hours had passed, Minori sat motionless, facing the pain inside herself.

"Minori?"

The kitchen grew bright: Touya had come in with a Bug Light Lamp. Minori hadn't noticed her little brother until he was right beside her. For a moment, she thought he was some sort of illusion, and she stared at him with a foolish expression.

"Minori, what? Geez, your face..."

Touya had taken a hand towel out of his pack, and he roughly wiped Minori's face with it. When he caught her nose through the towel, and it snuffled when he wiggled it back and forth, Minori finally realized she'd been crying.

"Touya..."

"What is it, huh?"

"Touya."

"Yeah?"

Touya sat down on the chair next to Minori, loosened the straps on his leather armor, then dropped it and his pack with a *thud*. He was his usual self, the little brother Minori was so proud of. In spite of his blunt attitude, she could tell he was worried about her.

Her own arrogance, which she'd just discovered: She knew she had no right to be jealous, but no matter how much she told herself that, she couldn't control the emotion. At the sight of her brother's familiar profile, that jealousy subsided, just a little.

"Touya, listen. I..."

"Uh-huh."

"I think I like Shiroe."

"Well, yeah."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, you do. You like him."

Touya spoke without even turning to face Minori; he was using a belt to bind up the armor he'd taken off. His tone was so natural he might have been talking about the weather.

"Huh? What? Why are you reacting like that?"

"You've been crazy about Teacher Shiroe for ages, Minori."

"For ages? Have I?"

Had she really been? She might have been. She had been. ... Minori downshifted through three stages straight to depression. To Touya, this pain might be old news as well. Still, even so, when Touya was there with her, she felt as though the pain—a pain as if she were chewing sand—had faded a little.

"That's a problem."

"Why?"

At Minori's voice, Touya looked her way for the first time. Lit by the faint white light of the lamp, he looked more grown-up than usual.

"'Why'? Why would you ask me...?"

“It’s not giving you trouble, Minori. Is it? You don’t have a problem. It just hurts.”

Her heart leapt.

Those words pierced Minori.

It felt as if he’d seen right through her.

She remembered the finger Akatsuki had gently stretched out—her fingertip had touched Shiroe’s forehead as if she were trying to hold herself back but couldn’t quite manage it. Minori sensed that she was jealous of that fingertip.

The feeling wasn’t the least bit right, but even so, she couldn’t stop herself, and the ugliness just kept piling up.

That bitterness, and the pain, really did hurt.

Even so, she didn’t want to throw them away or leave them behind. She’d first noticed her feelings for Shiroe within that pain, and they bloomed sweetly inside Minori.

“Is that...okay?”

“There’s no help for it, is there?”

Maybe there *was* no help for it, Minori thought.

She wasn’t looking for an excuse for herself. It was her heart, trying to find something she could still use in the midst of her darkness and pain. In all the thick, muddy ugliness, her heart was longing for something that hadn’t rotted away, something that had value.

Minori drew a deep breath, the way Shiroe had showed her, and strained her ears, listening to the distant noises.

Shiroe...

She remembered Shiroe.

The words he’d said. The look in his eyes, behind his round glasses.

The way he chose his words carefully when he answered her questions. The way he looked when he unrolled a map and explained something to her.

The slightly troubled gesture he used to adjust his glasses.

The obstinate way he pursed his lips. His pale, determined profile.

The strength in his voice when he’d agreed: *Leave it to me.*

In Minori’s mind’s eye, transformed into a devastated wasteland by chaos and pain, those memories alone glowed with bright, vibrant color.

So as not to make a lie of it. So that she wouldn’t betray it. She wanted to exchange all the gray noise for that brightness.

In the kitchen, where Minori and Touya sat, a murmur that was like the breath of the town echoed very, very far away. After she’d

spent a long time in the flickering light of the Bug Light Lamp, Minori gave a small nod.

“You’re right. It isn’t...a problem. It just hurts. That’s all—I haven’t lost anything, and nothing’s bad, and I haven’t done anything. ...That’s right. I haven’t managed to do one single thing yet.”

The first feelings she’d known weren’t pastel-colored sugar candy.

They were like leaping flames or flowing blood, in the midst of darkness and cries of pain like rough static, and they had a brightness that cut her when she touched them. There was so much contrast in the feelings hidden in her heart that they made her dizzy, but even so, Minori smiled at her brother, just a little. The tears that ran down her cheeks hadn’t dried, but she had no intention of denying those tears.

There was no use in holding on to this pain when she hadn’t managed to do anything, Minori thought. Since they hadn’t begun, she told herself, they hadn’t ended, and she gave up.

She hadn’t repaid Shiroe at all, hadn’t caught up to him in anything. That meant her pain and suffering was only natural.

Minori got through the long night with Touya’s help.

It was the first night to temper that blade of blue steel, but Minori was well aware that it wouldn’t be the last.

CHAPTER.



THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

▶ NAME: SHIROE	
▶ AGE: 23	
▶ WEAPON: CAUTION	
▶ SPECIAL SKILL: MAGICAL PHOTOGRAPHS WITH ONLY ONE OPTION	
▶ BIRTHDAY: 11/23	
▶ FAVORITE FOOD: MACKEREL STEWED IN MISO	
▶ ITEM 1: [PINKIE] A COTTON PINKIE THAT LOOKS LIKE ONE HE WORE IN THE REAL WORLD. SHIROE USES IT AS CASUAL WEAR ALL THE TIME. IT'S A LITTLE BIG FOR HIM SO LOOKS BAGGY.	
▶ ITEM 2: [RAINBOW GLASS INK BOTTLE] A PRODUCTION CLASS ITEM THAT CAN CHANGE THE COLOR OF THE INK THAT'S PUT INTO IT. ANIBAS ONLY ARTIST GUILD STUDENT ARIMODOLU MAGGOS AND SELLS JUST A FEW OF THESE RARE ITEMS. ALTHOUGH NOT MANY GUILDS SUPPORT "WIBBLE, COOL" DO EXIST.	
▶ ITEM 3: [LONG KOTATSU TABLE] A FURNITURE ITEM THAT HAS AN IRRESISTIBLE MAGICAL ATTRACTION FOR ALL PINKIE TYPES. THIS LARGE, SIX-PERSON TABLE IS CUSTOM-MADE, LATTER, MORE AND MORE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH HAVE BEGUN TO USE THEM, TOO.	





<Wall Clock>
Cutting-edge
technology
that dominates
human life.

The cold autumn air made the sky clear. Dazzlingly bright stars twinkled in Akiba's night sky.

In the world of *Elder Tales*, there were more stars than there had been in the old world, and they were brighter. No one knew if this was because the air was clean or if it was due to the game's art design, but in this other world, the nights were ornamented with stars.

On this night, the night of the Libra Festival, the town of Akiba bustled until late.

Akiba was an Adventurer hometown, and its urban functions were extremely sophisticated.

In this case, *urban functions* meant gates, the bank, guild halls, the Temple, and a market that required registration. In the *Elder Tales* game, these five facilities had been all Adventurers needed to get by. *Sophisticated* meant there was nothing unnecessary. In other words, being sophisticated in terms of function meant that, other than the five indispensable types of facility, there had been nothing there.

Before the Catastrophe, there had been no living facilities in the town of Akiba.

Of course, taverns and inns had existed as town objects, but these had been put in as background, in order to express the medieval fantasy worldview, and although players had used them to role play—in other words, to pretend—the buildings hadn't seen practical use in day-to-day life.

However, since the Catastrophe, Adventurers had been compelled to use this town as their home base and to live there in the truest sense of the word. This meant that even if they stayed only in town, they needed certain facilities. The earliest change had been that the restaurants had prospered; after that, various types of stores, private shops and service businesses began to thrive.

Some of these shops were run by Adventurers, but most were operated by Adventurers and People of the Earth working together, or simply by People of the Earth.

There were several reasons for this, but one of the biggest was the wage differential. Adventurers were able to earn greater rewards in less time than the average Person of the Earth. If they got serious about it, even a midlevel Adventurer could put down field monsters and earn more in a day than a Person of the Earth farmer could earn in a month.

The difference in production wasn't as great as it was in combat abilities, but even so, it was clearly there. From the Adventurers' point of view, even craftsmen considered experts by the People of the Earth only seemed to have subclass levels around 60.

Of course, with Chefs or Tailors and the like, if their level was 20, they could make items whose quality was good enough for use in everyday life. For Chefs at that level, that meant fresh-baked bread and delicious soup, crispy fried potatoes and golden roast chicken. For Tailors, it meant comfortable shirts, loose slacks, vegetable-dyed tunics and leather vests.

The People of the Earth could make these "items that were good enough for everyday use" as well. That meant the Adventurers naturally drifted into work territories only Adventurers could handle, while the People of the Earth took charge of creating the sort of items that were in common circulation.

Through this change, Akiba lost its game-related efficiency and acquired rows of all sorts of shops and facilities. Naturally, the number of People of the Earth also doubled, and the speed at which their population increased was accelerating. As a result, shops run by People of the Earth opened in rapid succession.

There was one more reason behind the growth of the People of the Earth population.

From the Adventurers' perspective, a player town was nothing more than their base camp. Almost all Adventurers thought of it simply as a place where adventures began, a convenient place to make preparations. However, for the People of the Earth, it meant something different.

To the People of the Earth, Adventurers were beings that were completely unlike them: immortals with powerful combat abilities. To them, player towns were the frontline bases these Adventurers had built in their world.

Most People of the Earth felt grateful to the Adventurers, and they respected them. Adventurers often protected them from the wastelands and monsters of Yamato, and in this world, they were beings that could be relied on. However, at the same time, they felt great dread. This was true with regard to the player towns, but also their Temples, the devices they used to resurrect. They might actually have felt a greater fear of the places—as forbidden lands—than they

did of individual Adventurers.

The People of the Earth who made their homes in the town of Akiba were special people who'd lived there for generations. In a way, their family lines might have been similar to those of *mikos* or Shinto priests who served dangerous, mercurial gods. Organizations such as the bank and consignment sales were maintained by this special People of the Earth demographic.

However, that age of dread was past.

The Adventurers had used their fearsome strength to save the People of the Earth from goblins, orcs, and powerful monsters such as dragons time and time again. Meanwhile, though, the Adventurers had always seemed to insist on transient relationships, those of "clients" and "solution providers." The only relationships Adventurers would form with the People of the Earth were temporary ones. That was simply common sense.

However, a short while ago, the first ever formal treaty had been concluded between Adventurers and the People of the Earth.

The meaning of that signature between Eastal, the League of Free Cities, and the Round Table Council was certainly not trivial.

The People of the Earth had taken it to mean that the Adventurers had turned to face them, not as well-intentioned helpers who were just passing through, but as participants in this world.

One symbol of this had been Princess Raynesia's transfer to Akiba.

Raynesia had shown that she wasn't just a representative of the nobles, but was living in the Adventurers' town as a representative of the People of the Earth.

With these circumstances in the background, Akiba's People of the Earth population was growing by the day.

Originally, many of the buildings in Akiba might as well have been ruins, but as the town took in more People of the Earth, the townscape itself gradually changed. Rubble was cleared away, and buildings that looked as if they might have been haunted were cleaned.

Most of the Adventurers living in Akiba were Japanese.

For better or for worse, they were good-natured, and when they saw People of the Earth industriously repairing the town, some of them thought, *Well, I'm bored, anyway. I might as well go help out a little*, and went. When they worked alongside each other, they talked to each other, and eventually they opened up to each other.

By now, the number of Adventurers in Akiba who employed People of the Earth had grown markedly, and the number of People of the Earth who did business with Adventurers had increased more than tenfold.

This place, Linguine, was one of the taverns run by People of the Earth.

It was a pub and eatery that was geared toward professionals, but on the first night of the Libra Festival, even it was crowded with people.

“This tomato stew is a *mewr de force*.”

“It is delicious, isn’t it!”

Near the back of the shop, which was noisy with voices, Log Horizon’s adviser (or rather its leader) Captain Nyanta and Serara (the Crescent Moon League’s newbie caretaker, who was a newbie herself) faced each other across a table.

The shop wasn’t that big, and it was jam-packed with customers. It was already October and the night wind was cold, but even though the heater wasn’t on, it was hot inside the restaurant.

For the past few days, many People of the Earth had come to the town in preparation for the festival. Naturally, all the lodging facilities in town were full, and the zones the Round Table Council had readied as temporary lodging facilities were being used as well.

The restaurants were no different: Everywhere, business was booming. This backstreet eatery prided itself on the flavor of its food, and even it was bursting with Adventurers and People of the Earth who were having a drink to fire themselves up for the next day, when the festival would begin in earnest.

The new cooking method the Round Table Council had announced had traveled like the wind and spread to all corners of Yamato. However, that didn’t mean there were many Adventurers or People of the Earth who could use it well. On the contrary, since it was limited by skills, only a small percentage of the population could. These people used limited ingredients to turn out new dishes, day after day.

In comparison to the Adventurers—who tended to try to re-create the dishes they’d eaten in Japan—the inexperienced People of the Earth rifled through the recipes in their libraries and created dishes in their own styles. Their cooking methods were still simple, but this resulted in unaffected flavors, and some establishments grew quite famous.

Linguine was one such eatery.

It was known for a stewed dish that was a bit like tomato-flavored *oden*, and this, together with the fact that it was around the time when liquor was served, meant the place was filled with a low-class din. The eatery was a bit too rough-edged for a girl, but Serara was content to be able to have a late dinner with her beloved Nyanta. It was a small restaurant, too, and the thought that they were close enough for their knees to bump under the table made her feel bubbly and happy.

“Are you tired, Nyanta?”

“Not at all.”

Although Nyanta had said that, he'd been hugely busy doing all sorts of things that day. The Crescent Moon League would be running several shops during the Libra Festival. Snack Shop Crescent Moon was being revived, the sewing department would be giving a demonstration and conducting sales, and the Blacksmiths were selling weapons with names engraved on them.

The Crescent Moon League was a small guild, and each of its departments had five people at most. Nyanta had been helping out by acting as an assistant and teacher for the cooking department.

“They came out well...didn't they?”

“They're right as rain, Seraracchi.”

“I'm looking forward to tomorrow.”

“So am I.”

The thought of the busy day she'd spent with Nyanta, and of how, when dawn broke, she'd be working as a salesgirl all the next day, made Serara happy and excited. In this case, the happy excitement was due more to the bit about spending a whole day with Nyanta than the part about being a salesgirl all day.

To be honest, when Isuzu had left the Crescent Moon League and switched to Log Horizon, Serara's heart had wavered a bit. Serara had loved Nyanta since the day he'd saved her in Susukino. Saying she didn't want to transfer to be with him would have been a lie.

However, Serara was in charge of looking after the Crescent Moon League's newbies. Unlike Isuzu, who'd just come from Hamelin, Serara had people who were counting on her.

She'd apologized to Nyanta once. *I can't go to Log Horizon*, she'd said. She hadn't wanted him to think her affection was a lie.

Nyanta had smiled and said, “Mew're an admirable girl, Seraracchi.” Nyanta, who was mature and a gentleman, had always been kind, but since then, she felt as if he'd grown even kinder... As if he really listened to what she said. As a result, Serara was quite content with her current position.

The tomato-stewed seafood and vegetables were delicious, simultaneously refreshing and substantial. The iced orange water was good, too. Serara was having fun talking with Nyanta about nothing in particular, and was happily working her way through her meal.

Just then a sharp *smash* rang out, and the commotion in the eatery died in an instant. Apparently a server had dropped a dish. The shop's famous tomato stew had splashed all over the place, sketching geometric patterns like bright red flowers on the stone floor.

The white porcelain plate had shattered and was scattered across

the floor, but this was a restaurant, and these things happened. It was a very commonplace sort of trouble. However, just as the commotion began to return, it was cut off again by the sound of a blow.

Serara, who had been on the point of lowering her eyes to the table, saw a falling waitress and a man looming over her.

“Don’t give me that! Just look at this stain! What are you going to do about it?!” the man shouted.

Quickly, Serara checked their statuses. It was likely that both were People of the Earth. Their main classes weren’t the Adventurer kinds. The man was still young, and he looked like an aristocrat; the clothes he wore were expensive. He berated the waitress for her clumsiness in irritated tones, then spat out that it wasn’t an amount a lowly serving girl could pay for.

The eatery was hushed; everyone was holding their breath. The atmosphere seemed to please the man. He grew even more high-handed and began insulting the restaurant: It was small. Dirty. Noisy, without a shred of class. He’d come because he’d been informed it was famous, and he’d been sorely disappointed. Well, he said, at least it was *quiet* now.

Serara’s mood began to sour.

They’d been enjoying their meal.

The food was delicious, and yes, it was a bit noisy, but there was nothing wrong with that sort of atmosphere. As a matter of fact, everyone had seemed to be having fun. This was that sort of restaurant, and people who liked that sort of restaurant should come here. It wasn’t polite to disturb other people’s dinners. Those were her honest thoughts.

“Is that guy an idiot?” someone in the eatery muttered.

The man had the wrong idea. The eatery wasn’t the sort of dedicated palace dining hall that the man—probably a noble—was accustomed to eating at, nor was it a *ristorante* patronized by fashionable society. It was a backstreet eatery that served good tomato stew.

He’d gotten one other thing wrong as well: The place hadn’t gone quiet because people were cowed by his authority. They were just disgusted by the depth of his stupidity.

“Who was that?! Who mocked me?!”

At the man’s enraged voice, three Adventurers stood up. Possibly sensing a threat from them, People of the Earth warriors who looked like bodyguards and had been eating at a separate table from the man rose as well. The situation was strained to the breaking point, and the atmosphere in the eatery began to grow tense.

“Nyanta...”

As she spoke, Serara huddled down.

It wasn't fear. Serara was a full-fledged Adventurer herself, and she'd played a part in the battle for Choushi, the worst part of the Zantleaf Defense. She even had experience fighting the undead and magical beasts. In combat, tension on this level wouldn't come close to qualifying as a scene of carnage. However, being right there when humans were hurling emotions at each other was different from the tension of combat. The wish that everyone would just get along was being trampled underfoot, and this turned into an indescribable pressure that threatened to swallow her.

"There's no need to worry."

As Nyanta stood and turned around, he casually reached out and grabbed the young nobleman by the scruff of the neck, just the way you'd pick up a cat. Caught off-guard and dumbfounded, the young man's eyes darted this way and that.

"Mew mustn't cause mischief, mew know. This is a place where everyone comes to eat and enjoy themselves."

"Silence, peasant!"

"I'm an Adventurer."

At Nyanta's response, the man was momentarily at a loss for words, and a look of confusion raced across his face. Right: This was Akiba. The People of the Earth population might have grown, but even now, over half the people who moved through the town were Adventurers.

Possibly he'd forgotten that fact. The man's face twisted in frustration.

"Then it's really nothing to do with you!"

"Erm..."

"This is People of the Earth business. There are differences in rank among us. Stay out of this! It's nothing to do with you Adventurers. I don't intend to interfere with you!"

"Oh yeah? It sure didn't look like that."

"You were talkin' quite a lot of smack about our favorite restaurant."

The three who'd stood up at the back of the eatery really were Adventurers. One of them was casting a recovery spell on the young waitress.

The man's warrior bodyguards were licking their lips frequently and glancing uneasily from side to side.

The difference in skill levels was clear from a glance at their equipment. The Knights of Izumo would have been one thing, but the knights kept by the various lords were no match for a high-level Adventurer. The bodyguards assigned to a noble's profligate son were probably no more than level 10 or so.

Even to Serara, the bodyguards looked as if they could be taken down instantly.

“Young master, if you’d, uh, please just—”

“This is the town of Akiba. Akiba has its own order that Akiba must protect. Mew mustn’t cause trouble.”

As Nyanta interrupted the bodyguard’s words, he began walking toward the door. The young aristocrat tried to yell and struggle, but he was boggled by the fact that Nyanta—who was thin, and didn’t look young—was easily dragging him along with one arm, and his mouth only flapped uselessly. When Nyanta reached the doorway, he held the young man up in front of his eyes without seeming to put out much effort.

“Mew don’t need to pay. We’ll say this was on the house. There’s a festival today, so enjoy mewrself, and stay out of trouble.”

When Nyanta tossed the man out the door, the man’s bodyguards followed him hastily, crying, “Young master, young master!”

That wasn’t enough to trigger a response from Akiba’s guard system. It was common knowledge among the town’s residents that unless you drew a sword or inflicted direct damage, the guards were surprisingly lax.

“Nyanta.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Let’s go back to our meal.”

At Nyanta’s calm words, Serara relaxed.

In the same way, the tension went out of the eatery’s atmosphere, and the noisy mood returned. The serving girl went around apologizing to everybody, but the only responses she got were voices telling her not to worry about it, that it was only natural. The girl turned bright red and thanked them.

“Still, that was unusual, wasn’t it...”

“Well, there are more People of the Earth now. Besides, there’s a festival on today, and lots of folks who aren’t mewsed to the town are visiting.”

Nyanta put tomato stew on a piece of bread he’d carefully torn off, then took a bite.

“The People of the Earth have a kind of aristocracy, mew see. They may be bewildered by the atmosphere in Akiba.”

“‘Bewildered’...” Serara trailed off.

Serara had lived almost exclusively in Akiba. She’d been in Susukino for a short while, but she’d spent her time there in hiding, and she couldn’t say she knew what the town’s atmosphere had been like. As a result, she wasn’t familiar with the atmosphere and customs of People of the Earth towns, but she thought it would be sad if discrimination and violence from aristocrats were routine.

However, the People of the Earth were the other protagonists in

this world. They had the right to conduct their own culture and lifestyles as they wished. In fact, the Adventurers might be the ones who had no right to upset the system. She'd heard Nyanta and Shiroe say something along those lines. The words hadn't really made sense to her before, but now they soaked heavily into her heart.

"Well, even so. Our town is our town. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Smile when mew eat delicious food. Enjoy mewrself at festivals. ...When it looks as though a fight may break out, we'll just have to be careful together, that's all."

In response to Nyanta's words, Serara nodded, relieved.

While this festival was for Serara and the other Adventurers, it was also the very first event to be opened to People of the Earth. They might get more of the sort of trouble they'd had today. Still, they had no intention of turning back. Serara thought, without needing to be told by anyone, that this was necessary.

Inside the pub, the warm, noisy atmosphere had returned. The minor trouble of a few minutes before might have left doubts and unease inside their hearts, but apparently there were no Adventurers who would let that discourage them. If a fuss that small could have unsettled them, they'd never have managed to live in another world.

These past five months had trained the Adventurers of Akiba very well.

...And so things would be all right. Reassured, Serara smiled at Nyanta.

► 2

That same night, somewhere else, another pair was working with desperate energy.

It was Marielle and Henrietta, the beautiful (?) duo who led the Crescent Moon League. They fired off a storm of orders, one after another, moving forward with preparations for the temporary shops and show that would open the next day.

The Crescent Moon League currently had sixty-five members. Their numbers had grown with the Hamelin incident, but at this size, they were still firmly midclass. Naturally, they didn't have the strength to set up stalls on a huge scale like the three major production guilds.

However, there was also the fact that this festival had originally been proposed by the small and mid-sized guilds.

New ideas weren't produced exclusively by the big guilds. All it

took for all sorts of new products to be created was a skilled artisan with a flash of inspiration. That was what Akiba was like at present. When the item was created at a big guild, they were able to announce it far and wide. However, if the artisan belonged to a small guild, in terms of strength, the guild had trouble promoting that item.

The idea that had been thought up in response had gone through various incarnations before becoming the current Libra Festival.

In other words, since the Libra Festival would attract participants and visitors from all over, if the small and midsized guilds participated, it would be easier to make sure lots of Adventurers and People of the Earth merchants saw their items.

The Crescent Moon League was planning to bank on this effect and set up stalls as well.

Of course, the internal circumstances were extremely cheerful. Even Marielle and Henrietta had continued working until this late hour only to enjoy the cultural festival-like atmosphere to the fullest. ...But did that mean it was simply a game, with a complete disregard for profit? Not at all.

In the current situation in Akiba, it looked as though even the small and midsized guilds would have the opportunity to make a bundle, and all such guilds, including the Crescent Moon League, welcomed the atmosphere.

It was already the middle of the night.

Their Crescent Moon League companions were probably down for the count here and there around the guild hall. The center of the room they were in held a table that was about the right size for a game of Ping-Pong, and wooden crates were stacked up around it. The layout of the new guild hall, which had room to spare, had created this work space.

Marielle, who'd been packing vegetable-dyed tunics into a crate, rolled her shoulders, paused for breath, then spoke to Henrietta.

"Say. Don't'cha think we're about done?"

"Mm..."

On the other side of the table, Henrietta checked several documents, wrote numbers on some nearby tags, then pasted them onto boxes.

"Let's say yes, shall we?"

At those words, Marielle drew in a big breath.

The Libra Festival would begin in earnest the next day.

At the intersection of the two big streets that divided Akiba into quarters, many stalls would be set up according to the assignments they'd been issued in the Liaison Committee's lottery. The Crescent Moon League had also received a modest exhibition spot on the

central avenue. They were planning to resurrect Crescent Moon there and sell the legendary Crescent Burgers for the first time in a long while. Of course, the prices would be considerably lower than what they had been back then.

“That was price gougin’, wasn’t it.”

“It certainly was.”

Tired from packing crates, the two continued their conversation, their expressions dazed.

As they drooped in the workroom, both Marielle (the Crescent Moon League’s big-busted, beautiful, Kansai-dialect-speaking guild master) and Henrietta (the glasses-wearing, intellectual, sophisticated type that everyone wanted to be scolded by) were no different from ordinary female Adventurers.

Henrietta, who thought they were in danger of taking naps right there, said, “Marielle, straighten up,” and shook her partner’s shoulder. However, as a rule, Marielle wasn’t terribly disciplined to begin with. She nodded in agreement, but she still slumped listlessly.

Coaxing Marielle along, she’d managed to bring her to the sofa, but then Marielle seemed to have put down roots on it. If she was going to sleep, her bed would be better, but she stubbornly said she wanted to shower first, leaving Henrietta at her wits’ end.

“If you want to shower, then *shower*.”

“I’m just takin’ a li’l break. My hit points are in trouble.”

“Your HP bar is completely green. In any case, if you’re in trouble, you can just heal yourself, you know.”

Adventurers’ physical specs were high. Even Henrietta, a Bard, only felt a little warm, as if she’d been exercising, although she’d spent ten whole hours packing boxes. She was far from being worn down enough to be exhausted.

Henrietta thought that Marielle’s state was probably mental fatigue, rather than physical weariness from working.

“Lemme rest a li’l.”

With a deep sigh for her fretful friend, Henrietta sat down beside her.

“What is it, Mari?”

“Nothin’.”

“You lie.”

Henrietta shrugged her shoulders. Marielle’s attitude was too cute; she didn’t feel like taking the time to meticulously prepare a nuanced, profound verbal jab.

She could imagine why Marielle was sulking, after a fashion.

It was probably the matter she’d been teasing her about for the past month.

Henrietta ran her cursor along the menu she’d pulled up in her

mind.

“—Yes. It’s me. Yes, mm-hmm. ...No, no, I apologize for calling at such a late hour. And, in advance, yes.”

Having established a connection, Henrietta spoke into thin air. She was using the telechat function. Since the audio from the other party was played back inside your ears, it looked as though you were talking to yourself, but this magic contact made it possible to talk with faraway acquaintances.

Marielle knew this, and so she showed no signs of wondering whether Henrietta was talking to herself. However, instead, her dazed expression grew gradually serious, then began to look flustered and confused.

“Henrietta? Who’s that? Who’re you talkin’ to?”

“*Fu-fu-fu-fu*. Yes, yes. That’s right. Honestly! She’s so limp she hardly bears looking at. And the sulking, for goodness’ sake. Mari is just *toooo* adorable. Her chest is quivering like jelly, you know.”

“Who *is it*?! Who are you talkin’ to?!”

“I’m in the middle of a telechat, Mari. Could you be quiet, please?”

“How’m I s’posed to be quiet when you’re talkin’ about *me*?!”

Henrietta kept chuckling, and Marielle began to shake her shoulders. However, Henrietta had been her friend for a long time, and she was quite used to this. She tickled Marielle behind the ear with a white finger, then heartlessly tore her away and pinned her back against the sofa.

“Yes, mm-hmm. We have mountains of cargo here. If you’d be so kind as to help us out, Naotsugu— Yes, Marielle will be delighted as well.”

Completely ignoring Marielle, who’d frozen at the word “Naotsugu,” Henrietta calmly continued her telechat.

“If you would, please. Yes. Yes... We’ll see you shortly, then.”

Turning with a sunny smile, Henrietta saw a Marielle who was sulky and dismayed at the same time.

“Why’re you pickin’ on me, Henrietta?”

“I’m not picking on you. You misunderstood me, Mari.”

At that, Marielle scowled, looking as if she wanted to say something. In her face, with its smooth oval outline, her expressive, shining eyes were quite attractive. That said, even if Marielle was adorable, Henrietta had no intention of showing her mercy. Persecuting her and encouraging her were both Henrietta’s hobbies.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right like that? Naotsugu should be here in a bit less than an hour to help.”

“Now?! In the middle of the night?!”

“Yes. After all, as ladies, it will be hard for us to transport everything on our own,” Henrietta answered nonchalantly. As though someone had suddenly switched on her power, Marielle stood up straight, snatched up a nearby cardigan, and broke into a run. She was probably headed back to her room to take a shower.

“I-I! I’m gonna go pick some flowers!!”

Marielle ran off, leaving a transparent euphemism for “freshening up” behind her. Henrietta waved at her back, saying, “Give it your best,” then sat down on the sofa.

Mari is as cute as always. I doubt this will turn into anything anytime soon. Goodness gracious me. But, that aside...

Henrietta flipped through a sheaf of papers she’d taken from her bag.

She’d heard a bit from Naotsugu about what Shiroe had been like, and it had reminded her of something that had been bothering her.

They were materials that had been compiled by the Liaison Committee: A list of guilds, shops, individuals, and groups that hoped to exhibit. The exhibitor fees had been set low, but even so, the revenue from those alone would be significant. That was how far beyond their expectations the festival had grown.

The main cause was the People of the Earth. Merchant traders and noble merchants were coming, not just from Eastal but from the West as well. Akiba’s economic scale was larger than could be inferred from its population. People of the Earth society had noticed this and begun scrambling to make inroads into Akiba, and this was the result.

Calasin and the other members of the Liaison Committee had anticipated this as well, but a closer look revealed that the level of attention had been far higher than they’d predicted. At the festival that would begin tomorrow, the small and midsized guilds in particular would be startled by how good business was.

Most of the stalls, which were treating this like a school festival “by Adventurers, for Adventurers,” would probably sell out in a heartbeat. After all, the People of the Earth merchants had come to lay in stock. They were fundamentally different from Adventurers, who’d carefully examine the items they wanted and buy them for themselves, one item at a time.

But...

Henrietta pushed up her glasses with a fingertip.

Her slim, silver-rimmed glasses, which were practically her trademark, glinted very slightly over her expression as she concentrated. Something was tugging at her: Her experience as a working adult. Although she could never have called herself a veteran

of such a thing, her experience with flipping through the books as a self-acknowledged accountant was telling her that something wasn't quite right.

The mysterious, murky sensation was unpleasant, and Henrietta bit her lip.

What would Master Shiroe...?

She remembered the young man's profile, which had grown familiar to her somewhere along the way.

Come to think of it, his profile was all she remembered. It wasn't that she'd never talked to him face-to-face, but Henrietta seemed to remember always watching that obstinate young man's important scenes from the side. During the conference where the Round Table Council was established, and at that meeting where Raynesia had taken a stand. Henrietta had always played a supporting role, watching that profile from a step away.

The young man whose profile held a strong will and sharp intuition might expose the true form of Henrietta's unease for her.

She was so tempted by that thought that she scanned through her address menu, but in the end, she didn't contact him. This was a conclusion she'd reached after repeated consideration.

Shiroe already had his hands full with odd jobs for the Round Table Council.

Calasin and Henrietta had made a pact not to trouble him with miscellaneous tasks for the festival. Of course, it hadn't been said in so many words, but they were both aware that the Round Table Council was driving Shiroe too hard.

Besides, at this point, Shiroe had Akatsuki and Minori. From Henrietta's perspective, both girls were as appealing as could be.

Akatsuki, a lovely girl with black hair like a Japanese doll's and a smooth, slender, graceful figure reminiscent of a swallow.

Innocent Minori, who was delicate and made you want to hold her close, yet seemed to embody strength and a sense of responsibility quite unlike a young girl.

When she looked at the feelings those two harbored for Shiroe, there didn't seem be any part left for her to play.

Henrietta considered herself plantlike by nature.

She couldn't really understand the animalistic emotions that surrounded romance, and communication founded on the sort of physical affection Marielle demonstrated seemed alien to her. What she did with Akatsuki was done in the spirit of dressing her up and admiring her, and Henrietta understood that it was different from the romance between men and women that everyone talked about.

Because Shiroe came to mind frequently, she thought it might be

that sort of thing. However, it wasn't so strong that, as in popular songs from the old world, she was madly desperate to meet him or form a connection with him.

"The best there was, for a man."

Henrietta had once evaluated Shiroe that way.

Although they were very pale, she was aware that her feelings were that type.

In short, I suppose I have an indifferent nature...

The fact did make her feel a little lonely. Having the face of a beloved someone in mind day and night was something she admired quite strongly, but she was aware that she didn't have that sort of tenacity of purpose, though it was probably fun in its own way.

To Henrietta, Akatsuki was adorable and a friend she wanted to treasure, and Minori, a new face, was also a friend she felt close to. She was glad she'd be able to get by without cutting in on their romance.

She couldn't support either one, but she was prepared to congratulate the one Shiroe chose.

As for Shiroe...

She wanted that unparalleled con man with the severe profile to be happy.

Henrietta thought Shiroe might be the type of person who could make the people around him happy only by first becoming happy himself.

Although those three are maddening to watch.

Henrietta sighed.

In that sense, both girls and Shiroe seemed incredibly clumsy. They might be the type who'd manage to have a brush with disaster just by going to an empty, grassy plain for a picnic. They were a troublesome trio, and it was frustrating not to be able to help them.

At some point, as she thought about the romantic circumstances of their companion guild, Henrietta had forgotten about the feeling of wrongness from a moment ago. Akiba was terribly busy these days, and there was just too much to think about.

► 3

Dawn broke.

In the early morning, the town of Akiba was wrapped in brisk October air. At this hour, when the sun wasn't really up yet, the air was damp, cold and filled with silence.

The topography and general structure of Akiba were the same as

Akhibabara in the old world, but naturally, some things were different.

The town was enveloped in greenery: It was enfolded by ancient trees, and moss and grass grew on its broad avenues and in its scattered plazas.

Deciduous trees and bushes with tiny, jewellike fruit covered the town. Akiba's mysterious landscape fused the ruins of tall buildings with nature.

Onto that greenery, an autumn morning mist fell softly.

Feeling its drops on her advancing toes, Minori hurried to the guild center.

It was the morning of the second day of the Libra Festival.

Unlike on the first day, when anticipation toward the kickoff festivities had gradually built from noon onward, the second day was packed with a solid series of events.

This festival's main events were the exhibitions and sales, the dinner party being held in Princess Raynesia's name, and the Akiba "Everything" Market that would be held from the evening of that day—the second day—through the night and continue into the third day. Yes, the main Libra Festival began today.

Perhaps because of the sense of anticipation, people were busily carrying cargo here and there, despite the town's typical schedule to be asleep this early in the morning. Each person was probably transporting merchandise for their stalls or hurrying to get items they didn't have enough of and hadn't noticed until the day of the festival.

As you'd expect, when she reached the entrance to the town's guild center, the commotion was clearly greater than usual. She saw several Adventurers going in and out. Forcing herself to greet people cheerfully, Minori entered the obsidian building.

Log Horizon was one of the eleven guilds that made up the Round Table Council, and Minori often visited the guild center as Shiroe's assistant. She was already acquainted with the People of the Earth ladies at the reception counter, and with several of the Adventurers stationed here.

She didn't head to the floor that held the Round Table Council's reference room and office, where she'd once gone to help out. Instead, today she made for the Production Guild Liaison Committee. She'd stopped by once on an errand for Shiroe, to pick up some materials, so she found it right away.

Even though it was early morning, the floor was enveloped in a flurried atmosphere. The big oak double doors were flung wide open, and several crates had spilled out into the hallway.

The PGLC had a central role to play in the festival. For that reason, even at this hour, it was buzzing with energy. From inside,

voices barked orders in near yells, and people were hastily running out or carrying things in.

Minori quietly slipped through the door, bowing to an Adventurer she knew. She was fairly sure the woman was a Shopping District 8 artisan.

“What is it, Minori?”

“I, um... Is Calasin here?”

Minori was vaguely uncomfortable. It felt a bit as though she were visiting the clubroom of a school club she didn’t belong to.

The artisan laughed at Minori’s restlessness, however, replying, “Sure, he’s inside. Go on in. You’ll have to excuse the mess, though!” She spoke loudly, probably because she was wired from pulling an all-nighter. Timidly, Minori went deeper into the office.

There was a reason she’d come here so early in the morning.

Last night, when Minori had seen Akatsuki and Shiroe’s quiet scene, she’d been depressed by her own wretchedness, but the goal she’d set herself for this festival was to wipe out Shiroe’s bad reputation.

The first method she’d come up with was to participate in the cake buffet, attracting attention as they did so, and gain an invitation to the great dinner party. If they attended the dinner party and chatted with the participants, public opinion of Shiroe would improve.

Although, in the end, that failed...

Twelve whole cakes had been far too impossible, Minori thought.

That was bullying. Honestly! But, there was no point in thinking that.

However, a failure was a failure, and if she wasn’t going to give up, she had to think of another way to complete her mission. She’d racked her brains, and had hit on the idea of appealing directly to the Production Guild Liaison Committee.

Fortunately, she knew Calasin of Shopping District 8, who was running the committee. If they had invitations left over, couldn’t she ask him for a couple and get them that way? That thought had brought Minori to the Production Guild Liaison Committee.

However, Calasin didn’t seem to be in any shape for that sort of thing. The central office of the PGLC—or was it a conference room?—at any rate, that big room was packed with a literal wall of documents.

She was used to seeing vast quantities of documents in Shiroe’s study, and since there were no computers in this world, she’d heard that they multiplied rapidly, but Shiroe’s study was nothing compared to the level of confusion in this room. At the very least, you could see a focused desire for order and efficiency in Shiroe’s study, while the

only things in this office were chaos and entropy.

On a corner of a table in the center of the room, Calasin and a young male colleague were desperately trying to protect a work space, or “civilization.” However, their efforts were in vain, and their weak lords were in dire distress from the threat of the surging barbarian hordes—in this case, the disorderly reports.

Calasin looked fierce, and Minori hesitated to speak to him. Just then, a man who’d entered the room behind Minori began to deliver a report in an energetic voice.

“Mister Calasin! Here’s the merchandise list and the reports for the south block! Thanks for your help!”

The young man added a stack of papers to the table and left immediately, but that attack completely changed the balance of power on the table. A tower of documents that had been teetering unsteadily fell, slipping from under the fingers Minori stretched out. In a chain reaction like collapsing dominos, the encroaching barbarians began to light the signal fires of invasion, one after another.

“Aaaaaah?!” “Yeek!!”

Calasin and his assistant shrieked. Their faces were pale with despair. Under the circumstances, that was only natural. After they’d sworn and railed for a bit, the pair had dejectedly begun to pile up documents again when Minori spoke to them.

“Shall I help you?”

“Damn and blast. Of all the... Huh? ...Um...”

“She’s one of Shiroe’s. Minori, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Here, let me help.”

Minori rolled up her blouse’s long sleeves. She couldn’t ignore a mountain of documents this chaotic. She also calculated that if she helped here and improved Calasin’s impression of her, he might listen to her request.

“Sure, thanks. ...Taro, get us some tea. Strong stuff.”

“Yessir, understood.”

The boy staggered out the door; there was no telling how long he’d worked without a break. Calasin and Minori watched him go, then set to work collecting the scattered sheaves of paper. At a glance, they seemed to be forms for the day’s exhibitions and sales. Forms related to business deals, written inquiries, instructions, tax payment forms and all sorts of other things were mixed together, and they’d been sorted by paper size alone and piled up in heaps.

“Calasin...um... These are all different types.”

“I know they’re all over the map, but once the stack falls, there’s no telling what the categories are. Actually, since we didn’t have set

forms or formats to begin with, even if the files are for the same thing, the sizes are all different...”

Calasin groaned, shoulders drooping.

“I didn’t think it was going to be this rough. I tell ya, the People of the Earth are hard to deal with. I wonder if they’re paying taxes.”

“Did something happen with the People of the Earth?”

“Well, this is business, so it’s normal to change or add things right beforehand, but... We didn’t think we’d have this many people. The files are slipshod, too; maybe it’s because our cultures are different. If it were just our fellow guilds, it would be all right, but the Round Table said to keep records this time around.”

Calasin shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *You know how that goes, right?* True, the chaos was so bad it was a bit off-putting. They knew they had to organize it, but even as they worked, inquiries and reminders continued to arrive in a constant stream. Once a file had disappeared into a mountain, it was hard to track it down again.

Of course, Shiroe’s high opinion of Calasin’s on-site management abilities had been correct, and the staff seemed to be diligent as well. Their responses to inquiries were prompt, and their decisions were immediate.

That advanced decision-making ability kept the office running even if the reports and files weren’t getting organized, making it possible to postpone the problem. Even if things were all right now, Calasin would gradually be driven into a corner. A backlog was building, both from the papers that had been turned in beforehand and from the files that were increasing moment to moment.

“I’ll help out here today.”

“Are you sure? Log Horizon has several things going on today, too, doesn’t it?”

After giving it a little thought, Minori offered to help. The cake buffet route had been cut off, so it was true that she did have time. Shiroe had said they’d be helping the Crescent Moon League, but if necessary, he could contact her via telechat no matter where she was.

“Yes. I’m free.”

“In that case, I’m sorry, but please do. ...To be honest, we don’t have enough people to deal with the documents. Apparently Henrietta’s busy today, too.”

In response to Calasin’s words, Minori nodded. Shiroe had told her that Henrietta was involved with the Liaison Committee’s duties as well. The situation might actually have gotten as chaotic as it was because she’d stepped out for the exhibition and sale today.

“For now, I’ll start putting things in order.”

Minori lowered a nearby tower of documents to the floor, then

took paper and ink out of her pouch. The items' rank certainly wasn't high, but she'd made them herself.

Using her sheathed dagger as a paperweight, she began reading through the documents, starting at the top of the stack—not hastily, but quickly. This one was a receipt for cargo that had been taken into a warehouse. Minori nodded, setting it down in a small open space. One receipt. That was followed by an offender report from a watchman. One report.

It was the first step. Even if it was small, she mustn't let that discourage her. She'd only just begun, so of course the results would be small. The important thing was staying dedicated to the task.

After all, I haven't done anything.

She'd idolized Shiroe, and she loved him, and yet she hadn't even begun to move. The pain from last night, when she'd discovered that about herself, still burned in her heart. Up until yesterday, she'd still been inside her eggshell.

In that case, she had to start something.

If she loved Shiroe, she wanted to do something for him.

She was still just an ordinary middle schooler, the sort you'd find anywhere, but Minori wanted to become the sort of person who could give Shiroe something, so that she could be proud of having been in love.

That was the conclusion Minori had come to after getting through that night of heart-searing pain.

Before, she'd simply idolized her teacher's back without giving it much thought, had made it her goal just so she could be with him, but now, inside Minori, that back had a different meaning.

If she'd wanted only to follow Shiroe, to see the same things he saw, it would have been all right to make his back her goal. However, if she wanted to help him, she had to acquire a different sort of strength. It would probably be very hard to walk the same road while working toward a different power, but that was the course Minori aspired to now.

The improvement in Adventurers' physical capabilities applied to vision and reflexes as well.

Minori put these to work, sorting documents with astounding speed. Files that seemed to need immediate action after she glanced through them were tossed into a crate she'd borrowed from nearby, one after another. She'd probably need to have Calasin check it regularly. She sorted the other files into categories.

Minori's current subclass was Apprentice. She hadn't liked Tailor and had wanted to change her subclass as soon as possible, but she

hadn't been able to decide what to change it to. At that point, Shiroe had recommended Apprentice.

Although Apprentice was one of the subclasses, it wasn't a "class" in the general sense. It was similar to a role-play Accountant or Fortune-Teller, but it was a system with much stranger characteristics.

Apprentices were able to register other players and "copy" several of their subclass abilities that could be acquired at a low level. Minori was carrying paper and ink she'd made because she'd apprenticed herself to Shiroe—in other words, registered Shiroe as her master—and had copied his skill.

An apprenticeship came with an experience points acquisition bonus, and it leveled up fast. In addition, because some skills could be copied from masters, it wasn't a hard subclass to develop. However, because the skills Apprentices could copy were limited to skills below midlevel, and because the subclass didn't have many of its own unique special skills, it wasn't a very popular one.

What really set Apprentices apart came after they'd developed: With the exception of special subclasses that had class-change conditions, it was possible to transfer into almost any subclass, and you could take your experience points with you.

For example, if an Adventurer raised their Apprentice subclass to level 30, then transferred to Chef, it was possible for them to start as a level 30 Chef instead of having to start from level 1, as they would normally have had to do.

If you wanted to end up in a subclass like Blacksmith, where leveling up took time, people said that getting there via Apprentice wasn't a bad idea. That said, in that case, there were still problems: You needed a master, and although you'd leveled up, the number of recipes in your item creation menu hadn't increased, so another kind of effort would be necessary in order to build your repertoire.

These drawbacks didn't bother Minori in the least.

In the first place, she was in this subclass so that she could imitate Shiroe, so handicaps on that level weren't meaningful handicaps at all. Besides, right now, her Scribe skills—the same ones Shiroe had—were serving her well in this struggle with the chaotic documents.

Minori copied all the documents that had to do with items people wanted to sell into forms she'd hastily created on cheap paper. When she'd accumulated a certain amount, she "copied" them, then put the originals in a crate. In the course of helping Shiroe, she'd gotten used to summarizing mere forms into materials that could actually be used.

Minori looked around at the mountains of documents.

On this battlefield, there had to be *something* that Shiroe had already acquired, but which couldn't be learned in battles in *Elder*

Tales. At the moment, she didn't know what that was, or whether it had meaning or not.

There were several hints hidden in the knowledge Shiroe had taught her up until now. The "things Shiroe had told her" had been buried in a vast amount of methods for conquering the *Elder Tales* game, but that certainly hadn't been all there was.

Guild administration. All sorts of past feuds. The things that had made him happy about his MMO gaming career. The things that had made him sad. Things he couldn't forgive, and things he'd tried to forgive. The various situations in which battles of will had gone beyond game combat. The secret to that something had to be hidden among the many anecdotes Shiroe had related to her.

However, Minori's inexperience held her back, preventing her from putting them into practice.

...And so, she would stay here.

The decision Minori had made was to keep fighting. This was Shiroe's old battlefield, and the battlefield on which Minori's present was buried.

"You're good at this, Minori."

"Because I'm Shiroe's Apprentice."

As Minori answered, smiling, her expression held strength that hadn't been there the day before.

► 4

"Thankyewverramuch!"

"Carryout complete. Five more wagons to go!"

"Hey, I'm freed up now. Hand 'er over!"

Day Two of the festival. That morning, commotion enveloped the town.

After all, the festival was full of firsts. Nobody had a complete grasp of the whole thing. That was probably true even for Calasin, who stood at the top of the Production Guild Liaison Committee, which was running the festival. Initially, the event project had been nothing more than a collection of volunteers from the small and midsized guilds who wanted to show off the new items they'd created to the whole town.

As the scale expanded, the Liaison Committee should have been swamped with central paperwork, plunging the town into chaos.

However, due to the youth and the Japanese temperaments of the Adventurers who lived in the town, this didn't happen.

In this fantasy world, many Adventurers had more physical capabilities than they knew what to do with, which meant that, in other words, they were bored. If that boredom acted in a negative direction, they'd grow desperate and despair, and if it acted in a positive direction, it added to the enormous merrymaking.

On Akiba's main street, in the square beside the carriage lot by the Bridge of All Ages, a large pavilion tent had been set up. Although they called it a tent, it was really only a roof with heavy iron support pillars at its four corners, a bit like a field battle headquarters. The stern-faced members of the Knights of the Black Sword were rushing in and out of it. In the center of the tent, the guild master, Black Sword Isaac, sat majestically on a folding chair.

"Gimme water."

"We don't have enough Summoners. Send one over!"

"We're short on Summoners. If you've got a job that needs muscle, do it yourself. If you need heat or ice, ask a Sorcerer."

"We ain't Summoner substitutes. Lousy solo classes... Dammit. Hey, your ice is ready. Here ya go."

The inside of the tent was noisy as well, as if the town's commotion had been copied into it.

The Knights of the Black Sword was one of Akiba's leading combat guilds, one that only admitted Adventurers who had neared the upper level limit, a hard-line organization designed for conquering raids. Naturally, their membership was made up of hard-core gamers, and they boasted steel solidarity—or so outsiders assumed. In fact, they were just a noisy group.

"Yo, people! Pipe down!"

The loud warriors were thundered at by an even louder rough voice. It was their guild master, Isaac. He was a Guardian who was famous even in Akiba, with bright red hair and an intense smile that was bursting with confidence.

"Shaddup, General."

"Just sit there, Boss."

"You're dumb, Chief, so don't think."

As the people around him spoke to him this way, Isaac guffawed as though he'd been complimented. This was how the Knights of the Black Sword did things. To Lezarik, who stood nearby and was sending him pitying looks, he roared, "They're full of energy today, too!"

"Zone Patrol Team Three is back."

"Hey. Good work."

Isaac spoke to a group of three who'd just returned from outside.

He thought that noticing this sort of thing promptly meant you were fit to be a general, and that it was just like him to be so considerate. It was definitely a skill based in charisma.

“And? How was it? Hm? Did something happen?”

“Yes, we rescued a wagon that had gotten stuck on a side road, mediated four arguments, and handled one suit for payment... Wasn’t that it?”

“Great, that’s the way!”

Isaac nodded magnanimously, affirming his members’ report.

The Knights of the Black Sword were conducting voluntary town patrols.

By now, the Libra Festival had gone beyond the boundaries of Akiba’s small and midsized guilds and its production guilds, and had come to the attention of nearby People of the Earth aristocrats and merchants. Crowds of producers and merchants were surging in, attempting to sell their products. Fielding them and sorting out trouble required a realistic number of people.

The Production Guild Liaison Committee was working hard, but the organization’s reason for being was to balance interests between guilds. Where this matter was concerned, its main duties had been holding discussions and the lottery to select exhibition spots. It probably didn’t have enough people to handle any trouble in town proper.

With that in mind, Isaac was running patrols and inspecting incoming People of the Earth.

This was the Bridge of All Ages, which spanned the Kanda Irrigation Canal on the southern edge of town. Merchants from Izu and farther west crossed this bridge to enter Akiba. The entry checks were simple and cursory. Knights asked for the merchants’ names, and confirmed the number of people and wagons in their party as well as their main cargo. These items were written in a ledger, and that was it.

Compared to an actual customs check, it was full of holes.

However, Isaac thought that, with this sort of thing, what counted was fighting spirit.

In other words, power.

Knights of the Black Sword in rugged armor would break that lot’s morale by beating them to the punch. They’d hammer them with the intent to strike back hard if anyone caused trouble in town. It was all about fighting spirit and drawing lines.

“You look bored.”

“Shaddup. How’re things on your end?”

Isaac turned his sharp gaze on the individual who'd just entered. Like Isaac, the big man with glasses was one of the eleven guild masters who made up the Round Table Council: Krusty, the intellectual warrior who led D.D.D.

He was at the top of the town of Akiba, a man Isaac acknowledged as superior. Both as a guild master and as a Guardian, he was the only one equal to Isaac on the server.

“No particular problems on our end, either.”

Krusty's lips turned up slightly. Isaac decided that was how this guy with glasses smiled.

It wasn't that they hadn't been known to each other back in the days when this was a game. Although they led different guilds, they were both top players on the Yamato server. They'd spoken several times, and more than that, it would have been a lie to say that they hadn't been on each other's radar.

For raid guilds like the Knights of the Black Sword and D.D.D., the competition to be the first to attempt a raid was very important. A new expansion pack was applied, and new raid content was added. These were brand new challenges, like untouched, new-fallen snow.

And they were very difficult, of course.

Raid content was another name for high-end content created just for serious veterans, those who'd played through all solo and party content. In order to break through that obstacle, you needed crazed junkies who'd trained to the highest level, had a full range of equipment at the highest level, and whose strength of will was at the highest level as well.

In most cases, the raid content that was added with expansion packs consisted of between five and seven dungeons. Ordinarily, their difficulty was stair stepped. First, they'd test their skills by charging what was thought to be the easiest dungeon. The result had always been complete annihilation.

At that point, Isaac and his comrades would lick their lips, undaunted.

It meant, *This one looks like it's worth tackling.*

Making attempt after attempt, accumulating original ideas, and steamrolling a powerful raid boss brought an indescribable sense of achievement. As perks, they acquired fantasy-class items that held powerful, brand-new capabilities, and their companions' military might increased. They'd use the items obtained that time to beef up their forces, then tackle the dungeon at the next difficulty level. And then, the cycle simply repeated.



Of course, Isaac and the Knights of the Black Sword weren't the only ones attempting that race. D.D.D., the biggest, toughest guild on the Yamato server, was capturing them in the exact same way. Who would take that boss down first? Who would manage to clear this dungeon first? What raid guilds were after was the race to be first.

They were guilds that fought for fame.

To Isaac, that was what raid guilds were.

The fantasy-class items that came along with them were perks, nothing more than tools.

Greeders, players who were dazzled by high-class items, weren't warriors in the true sense of the world. The Knights of the Black Sword had no use for guilds like that. That was what Isaac thought.

"Right. But hey..."

"Mn?"

Still seated on his chair, Isaac looked up at the man in front of him. "This 'nothing happening' business blows. Think somebody'll start something?"

"I wonder."

"The People of the Earth ain't picking any fights."

This calm, expressionless giant of a man was the same type of person as Isaac. Level, special skills, equipment, and money were all no more than footholds. They were true gamers who had vied with each other for the position of top guild on the Yamato server. That was precisely why they were able to keep patrolling the town this way, when there was no hope of any return. It led to fame, and most important, it kept them from getting bored.

"With this great a disparity in combat strength... Well, I'd guess it's fifty-fifty."

"Hahn. You rate 'em pretty high."

Isaac was already used to the way the young man with glasses spoke. If this man said it, it was probably true. Besides, Isaac felt it as well.

"Hey."

"Yes?"

"That guy. The Machiavelli guy. Whaddaya think of him?"

"What do you mean, 'what'?"

Isaac's question came right back at him. Isaac shot Krusty a glare, but he didn't seem to have been dodging the question. Isaac shrugged and went in deeper.

"Machiavelli. Is he smart or an idiot?"

"I imagine it isn't impossible to be both."

"Y'know... I asked Machiavelli to join up one time."

Did the guy in question remember it, or not?

He'd evaded the matter at the conference, but Isaac remembered it clearly. It had been several months after the Debauchery Tea Party had suddenly disbanded. He'd figured the Tea Party would reform as a stand-alone guild, but it had just disappeared. Most of the members had withdrawn, seemingly without regrets, and returned to playing solo.

Unusually for that group, Shiroe had been a player whose log-in frequency hadn't dropped.

"After the Tea Party, Machiavelli took part in raids all over the place, as a mercenary. When he came to ours, I asked him to join up. I didn't ask him because of the Tea Party name, either. I'd seen him play."

"And?"

At Krusty's words, Isaac rolled his head, cracking his neck, and answered.

"Turned me down. 'That invitation's too good for me,' he said. So then I stopped caring. If a guy has the guts to rip through a raid monster, I'll ask him to sign on even if he can't stand it, but I've got no use for guys who are dried up and done."

Isaac really had given up on Shiroe.

However, he'd never imagined that Shiroe would grow again, and that he'd come to have influence in Akiba that way. Had his eyes been clouded? The thought had been bothering him.

If Isaac were asked whether he wanted to fight alongside Shiroe, the answer was yes.

He'd thought it would be fun to fight beside that eccentric-looking guy with glasses. He'd probably use methods as crooked as his expression to yield maximum military results. When he'd come to help out, although their MP should've run out entirely, somehow he'd managed to recover it for a dozen players at a stroke.

"Is the guy a strategist or a gambler? ...Is he washed up, or can he still go?"

"Shiroe's... He's probably the type who does best when 'anything's possible.'"

"When anything's possible—"

"I don't think he's a strategist. He doesn't care how it looks, he lets the end justify the means, he doesn't expect any return, doesn't pay attention to anything except the goal. Under circumstances like those, he shows unmatched strength. He's a type of demon sword."

Isaac didn't understand a word of what Krusty was saying, but as he listened to his voice, it suddenly all made sense to him.

The Shiroe Isaac had seen back then must have been just Shiroe's shell.

The spirit he'd shown at that conference had been Shiroe getting serious. When he thought of it that way, Isaac grew absurdly excited. He guffawed at the tall man standing beside him.

"Then that demon sword's buried in files and groaning, huh? Well, now. I wonder when it'll get drawn next. I bet the best is yet to come, yeah? All right... I guess I'll head out to take in the festival! Hey, Krusty! C'mon with me."

After chewing out a subordinate who'd come to deliver a report, Isaac issued an invitation to Krusty, and they turned their steps toward their own hometown, which was seething with Adventurers and People of the Earth.

► 5

A short while earlier in another corner of town, the women of the Crescent Moon League were making preparations for the exhibition and sale of winter clothes.

The venue was a newly created hall known as the Silver Hall.

In the old world, the site of the building in which the hall was located had held a huge composite electronics emporium, but, as usual in this other-world Akiba, that had been replaced with a ruin.

That ruin had been remodeled over two months, and the result was Silver Hall. Even if it was a ruin, the upper floors had only been sheared off; the foundation had still been completely intact, and its structure, like a high-ceilinged hotel, was convenient and had made the remodel relatively easy.

They'd developed a process of making molds with wooden frames, pouring cement into them, then shaping the surface with stucco, and this had made remodeling ruins much easier. This was another discovery that had appeared after the establishment of the Round Table Council, and the work had progressed rapidly. The Adventurers' ability to create items in very little time had worked to their advantage, along with the fact that they had spirits and other on-site labor to command.

The interior of Silver Hall had been divided into several large exhibition spaces. The main venue for the autumn festival was a first-floor ballroom, the largest one in the building. Inside, many guilds were making final preparations at their sales booths.

As one of these many guilds, the Crescent Moon League's clothing and accessories team had decorated their booth.

The booth was about five meters square, and between the crates

packed with merchandise and the table for the cashier, there wasn't much extra space. It held chests that had been made over into display shelves, and they were hanging up the all-important exhibit: the vegetable-dyed tunics.

Marielle and a few members who worked with clothing and accessories were acting as sales clerks. Akatsuki, who had been kidnapped to assist them that morning, was being dolled up in a corner of the booth by an uncommonly enthusiastic Henrietta.

"Akatsuki, dear, you're adorable. I mean it! I truly think I'm going to fall for you..."

"This is enough..."

Akatsuki spoke firmly, glancing up at her as if she was troubled. The sight made Henrietta scatter heart marks around. Even so, when Akatsuki tried to get away, she held her wrist firmly, mercilessly declaring, "Not yet."

Akatsuki was dressed in a vegetable-dyed tunic blouse that was being displayed as merchandise, coordinated with a black undershirt and an asymmetrical cotton wrap-skirt. The fringe on the skirt's hem and the necklace of wooden beads looked ethnic and cute.

"Since we're at it, let's add a little makeup."

"I'm not... Rrgh. I'm not good with that sort of thing."

"Don't worry. It's going to be just fine."

Henrietta knelt on the floor, as if to put herself on Akatsuki's eye level. Feeling an ominous premonition, Akatsuki tried to run, but when Henrietta took an eyeliner out of her pouch and began to draw it on, she froze, and there was no way for her to escape.

In this other world, women's skin was much better than it had been in the real world. To Akatsuki, it was good enough that there seemed to be no need for makeup at all.

However, makeup wasn't the sort of thing that was done simply because it was "necessary." As a rule, there was no limit to the desire to look attractive. They might be pretty enough, but it was feminine instinct to aim even higher.

Even Akatsuki wasn't denying makeup itself. In the real world, she'd worn a little as well. (...Awkwardly, as camouflage, but even so.)

Not only that, but in this other world, gazing fixedly at her own face in a mirror made her feel guilty, as if she were seeking some sort of narcissistic pleasure.

It was something she'd done quite casually in the old world, but now that she thought about it, makeup was a rather outrageous act. Why, in game terms, it would have meant changing your texture. It was successfully disguising yourself as a different person.

In any case, even during her time in the old world, Akatsuki hadn't put on makeup properly. Simply painting on gloss had blurred the edges of her lips, and she'd never used mascara at all.

"Uuu."

"You're a Japanese beauty, Akatsuki."

"Erg?"

Gently but quickly, Henrietta made up Akatsuki, who'd been recalling her own history with cosmetics. Using a thin brush, Henrietta outlined her lips. Akatsuki just stood stiffly, unable to resist.

"Don't worry. It's light makeup, so its effect on silly men who don't know the difference between natural makeup and no makeup will be excellent. Besides, since you're a traditional beauty, your atmosphere's a bit too rigid for this sort of clan-casual outfit. We need to increase your color saturation. Let's pull your hair back with a barrette as well."

Akatsuki could do nothing but agree.

When she looked down at herself, it was true that the patterned wrap skirt was ethnic—or rather, rustic—and it seemed as if it might not go that well with her black hair.

Obedying Henrietta's instructions, she closed her lips on a piece of tissue paper a few times, removing excess oil. "Ooh... You're just *too cute!*" Henrietta smiled and hugged her.

Up until a little while ago, she would have been mad about being treated like a mascot, but strangely, in the world of *Elder Tales*, she was able to tolerate it.

Maybe it's because I don't feel like people are making fun of me?

Even so, it made her uncomfortable, and she struggled a bit. Perhaps Henrietta noticed and took pity on her; she combed her hair a few times, clipped it back with a barrette, and released her. She was shown to the mirror, and she found that though her hair hung as straight and long as always, she looked just a little more mature. Maybe because her hair was bound back by the clip.

She'd avoided this hairstyle because she'd assumed it wouldn't work well with her short stature, but in combination with the light makeup, she felt as if it might not actually look bad on her. In spite of herself, Akatsuki came close to smiling.

"*Mature.*" ...*I like the sound of that!*

"What do you think?" Henrietta asked.

"Nn..... Mm-hmm."

Akatsuki was at a loss for words. She was happy, but acknowledging it clearly in words would be embarrassing. Besides, she would have really hated it if it sounded like she was bragging. That said, Henrietta had gone to a lot of trouble for her, and it would be mean to seem as though she was denying it.

Of course, that was true even if this makeup and costume were decorations for the sale and the show.

“Doesn’t it please you? —She does look sweet, doesn’t she, Master Shiroe?”

“Uh...huh?!”

However, her hesitation lasted only until she heard those words from Henrietta. Akatsuki froze, unable to move, just as if she’d been glared at by a Medusa. An uneasy *Don’t tell me* crawled its way up her spine.

“Mm-hmm. I think it looks very good on her.”

The perfectly calm, familiar, vaguely troubled voice Akatsuki heard behind her belonged to her liege, Shiroe.

“How long—”

“Since a little while ago. They called me here to help, too.”

Shiroe shrugged and continued, but Akatsuki couldn’t even meet his eyes. She thought she’d tremble so hard her mouth would twist into a weird shape; she didn’t feel like herself.

Henrietta, who wasn’t aware of these circumstances, said, “What do you think of this ensemble?” and pushed Akatsuki—who was trying to hide—forward.

Akatsuki hastily tried to circle around behind Shiroe, but Henrietta gently restrained her, and she couldn’t move. Shoving her away and running would have been easy, but it would have been far too outrageous an act.

“Rrgh.”

As a result, Akatsuki resigned herself to being put on display any way they wanted. She stared accusingly at Henrietta and Shiroe. Akatsuki meant the look as a glare, but the flaw in the gem was that, to the other two, it looked for all the world as if she was gazing up at them and pleading.

“It’s all right, Akatsuki. It really does look good.”

She resented the absurd way her temperature jumped when Shiroe set his hand upon her head. To Shiroe, the words were probably more of a conditioned reflex, or perhaps diplomacy, than anything. The problem was that they made her happy anyway.

Grr! I’m a failure as a ninja!

She desperately pulled her expression back together, but she couldn’t muster as much confidence as usual today.

“What did you want me to do?”

“You’ll be wearing these clothes, Master Shiroe.”

When Shiroe unfolded the clothes Henrietta gave him, his shoulders slumped. The outfit looked comfortable, but apparently he didn’t like it. Akatsuki thought it served him right.

That’s what you get for embarrassing me, my liege.

Besides, Shiroe always wore roughly the same thing, and she wanted to see him in casual clothes. Akatsuki had just begun to say something when a clear chime sounded from outside the venue.

For an instant, a hush fell over their surroundings. Then there was a cry of anticipation, like several hundred gathered sighs. Then a burst of applause began, although no one in particular had started it.

When Marielle came up to the three of them, she was applauding happily, too.

The doors had opened. It was the first festival held by Adventurers in this other world. At its main event—the exhibition and sales here in Silver Hall—clothes and accessories of all sorts were on display.

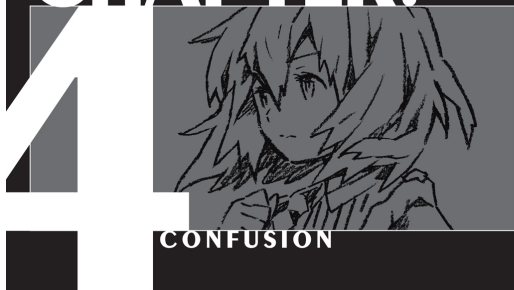
“All right, let’s see who stops by today! I hope we sell a ton. ...I think makin’ a hundred sets might’ve been too much, but anyway, let’s do our best.”

“They’ve opened the doors. Master Shiroe, Akatsuki. ...Thank you in advance for your help over this next half day. You’ll be show models and salesclerks. Let’s sell, sell, sell!”

Giving in to the pair’s happy smiles, Shiroe and Akatsuki nodded.

The second day of the Libra Festival. Just like this, the curtain rose on its main event.

CHAPTER.



CONFUSION

▶ NAME: MINORI	
▶ AGE: 14	
▶ WEAPON: DILIGENCE	
▶ SPECIAL SKILL: BARE FEET FALL, CONTROL ENCOUNTERS	
▶ BIRTHDAY: 9/18	
▶ FAVORITE FOOD: BROCCOLI	
▶ ITEM 1: [ORIGINAL] LONG DENIM SKIRT A LONG SKIRT MADE OF PERFECTLY ORDINARY DENIM FABRIC, BUT IT WAS BORN VERY CAREFULLY AND THE SIMPPLICITY OF THE PERSON WHO CREATED IT SHINES THROUGH. ACHIOCHI-MINORU BOUGHT IT WITHOUT KNOWING THIS, IT WAS ACTUALLY DESIGNED BY A DESIGNER OF THE EARLY ARTISAN WHO WAS INSPIRED BY ADVENTURE'S DESIGN.	
▶ ITEM 2: [FRESHWATER-PEARL SCRUNCHEE] A SCRUNCHEE WOVEN WITH DELICATE FRESHWATER PEARLS. IT'S A HAND WE DOWN FROM HOMETOWN. ONCE MINORU STARTED HELPING SHIROE WITH HIS WORK, SHE HAD MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO TIE BACK HER HAIR, SO HOMERITA GAVE IT TO HER. IT CAN BE WORN AS A BRACELET, TOO.	
▶ ITEM 3: [WHITE STUFFED BEAR WITH GLASSES] MINORU MADE THIS HERSELF. IT WAS ORIGINALLY ONE OF SEVERAL STUFFED ANIMALS SHE CRAFTED TO EXCHANGE ON THE MARKET, BUT SHE LOST THE PAIR. SO SHE KEPT IT WITH HER. ITS EYES ARE MADE TOO SHARP, BUT THAT'S WHAT MINORU LIKES ABOUT IT.	





<Laboratory Equipment>
Mix the red potion with the
blue potion, and...it's yummy!

The moment the doors opened, the floor was flooded with people.

A group of Adventurers who'd come on a pleasure trip as a guild. Young girls who were here to pick up the latest clothing creations at low prices. Skilled merchant traders lining up for the famous Tailoring guilds. Peddlers who'd come to lay in goods without even taking the time to undo their traveling clothes. Aristocratic merchants in resplendent clothes.

There had probably been some who'd anticipated the crowd, but it was likely that only a few guilds had expected business to be this good. There was a panic at all of the sales booths, and they were hard-pressed to provide service.

The event that was underway in this hall was a clothing exhibition and sale.

Since it was limited to garments, not all of the production guilds were present at this locale, though many were. It was only natural for guilds as large as the three major production guilds to have divisions that covered every facet of daily life, since they easily counted more than five hundred members each among their ranks. However, production guilds that were mid-sized or smaller tended to choose a theme for their guild and collect members around it, so only the garment-making guilds were here.

For example, Amenoma was a guild known to Akiba insiders that specialized in weapons forging, and more specifically, swordsmithy. Most of its members were high-level Blacksmiths, and there was a rumor that their fanatical pursuit of quality had finally, in this post-Catastrophe world, led them to forge by hand. But, not unexpectedly, their guild had no Tailors, so they weren't participating in this particular hall's sales space.

Of course, the Libra Festival as a whole held opportunities for all sorts of guilds and artisans.

The garment market that was being held on the first floor of the Silver Hall had been set up indoors at the request of the female Adventurers, but there was a flea market being held at the same time, centered on the town's main street, at which all kinds of items were

being sold from stalls.

The clothing-only indoor market, and the outdoor market that included everything from weapons and defensive gear to jewelry: If asked which one was the main part of the festival, the answer was, naturally, the outdoor flea market. That said, it was also true that this indoor exhibition was attracting enthusiastic attention from some very interested parties.

The highlight event of the garment market was the fashion show. It would be exactly what it sounded like: models, dressed in various elaborate outfits created by a wide range of guilds, strutting across a stage. The show would feature a big lineup of Akiba's most popular people and Adventurers who were considered beautiful, and as an event, it was quietly drawing fanatical attention. Considered thus, a certain percentage of the people who'd flooded into the venue were probably spectators, and couldn't really be called customers.

The booths were roughly divided into large and small sizes.

The large booths had many workers and lots of merchandise on display. These were the spaces rented by the so-called major guilds. These megaboosts were set up along the wall and were designed to make it easy to carry in stock.

The scale of the small booths, which were like little, half-open rooms set up along a partition wall down the center of the floor, meant they were for the small and mid-sized guilds.

The Crescent Moon League's booth wasn't in a terribly good location. It was rather removed from the center of the floor, but it wasn't along the wall, either. In terms of the flow of customers, it was a fairly disadvantageous position. It was far from the stage where the show would be held as well, and they expected to have a tough time of it.

However, unlike most of the guilds assembled in this hall, the Crescent Moon League wasn't a straight production guild. It was a lifestyle guild, the sort whose motto was "Do anything that anyone's interested in." As a point of fact, the exhibition booth was being run by volunteers from the guild, and it didn't have the guild's full power behind it.

Because it was a good-natured guild that attracted people who liked to party, if they'd asked, the combat-type guild members would have helped, too, but compared to the pure production guilds, their enthusiasm toward sales was rather low. That meant that, if the Crescent Moon League had taken a good location, people would have been bound to say they'd abused their authority as one of the eleven guilds on the Round Table Council. In that sense, this location was safer.

“Say, isn’t this gettin’ kinda outta hand?”

Marielle was calling “Whoa! Whoa!” in a loud voice and wandering around. Henrietta caught her. She dragged her guild master’s infuriatingly feminine body back behind the cashier table and pushed her down onto a small stool.

“Mari. You’re the guild leader. What good does it do for you to panic? Just sit there and be quiet for a while.”

“Yeah, but, it’s just... I haven’t seen this many people in f’rever...”

Marielle fidgeted restlessly.

Come to think of it, she was right. When they’d been in the old world, they’d ridden crowded commuter trains every day. It had been routine for them to see several thousand passersby in front of important train stations or crosswalks.

However, after the Catastrophe had sent them to this world, they’d stopped seeing sights like that. Akiba’s central plaza was lively, but because of its vast, open-air construction, it never felt all that crowded.

The venue was packed enough to remind them of the old world. The horde of visitors that had streamed in when the doors opened promptly crowded around booths here and there and launched into negotiations.

The fact that they could do this sort of comedy routine even in the midst of that bustle meant that the Crescent Moon League’s booth really was located away from the main flow of people.

The big guilds along the walls were inundated with customers right away, and, like rebounding spray, others began flowing toward the small and midsized guilds near the stage.

However, they only had the leeway to watch the flow of people for about thirty minutes after it had begun.

Once lines formed at the big guilds, some people began to think, *If we’re just going to be standing in line, let’s look around at the empty booths instead.* There were a formidable number of such wanderers.

Henrietta had planned to put Marielle(’s smile) on the front line and keep track of their accounts herself acting as the cashier, but as it turned out, she wasn’t able to do that.

There were more People of the Earth than she’d thought.

The Crescent Moon League members who’d come here to do business were Marielle, Henrietta, and two guild members with Tailor subclasses. The Crescent Moon League was also running a snack vendor stall and a weapons-forging shop at the flea market, in addition to the fashion-show exhibition.

As the guild leader, Marielle would probably need to put in an appearance at those as well. Once the afternoon fashion show ended, Henrietta had assumed she’d have to release her from this booth. That

would leave them with two younger members as their main force.

Henrietta glanced over at the two. They shook their heads emphatically.

Their meaning was clear: *We can't, we can't. We're amateurs!*

As Henrietta moved forward with the sales talk she was conducting, she sighed inwardly.

If the other party was an Adventurer who'd come in search of casual clothes to wear around town, they'd have almost no problems. They'd all be from Earth, and they'd all be aware that they were conducting business they weren't used to. The activity taking place on this floor was an advanced version of playing store, but for the Adventurers, that was enough.

On the other hand, most of the People of the Earth were merchant traders.

Not only that, but they hadn't come simply to purchase clothing. They seemed to be here to gather information, to network, and, if possible, to request negotiations that would lead to laying in stock in the future. As a result, they would ask sharp questions about things like price setting, materials and sewing methods. Those sales talks would be a bit too difficult to leave to young members who'd been no more than students back on Earth.

Well, it isn't as though I'm all that experienced or can take responsibility myself...

As Henrietta responded to cross-questioning from a middle-aged merchant Person of the Earth, she smiled superficially, but in her mind, she was examining herself.

The negotiations with the three big production guilds regarding the establishment of the Round Table Council... Henrietta wondered whether she'd acquired gambler's courage after making it through that deal.

Henrietta was still in her twenties.

There was no way she could be experienced enough.

When you were in your twenties, even if you said you were a full-fledged member of society, once you found a job, you realized you were no more than a chick with pieces of eggshell still stuck to you. This was something Henrietta had been painfully aware of in her life back on Earth. However, it was also true that unless you stood on the front line with those bits of shell still sticking to you, you'd never graduate from being a chick. She'd stood on the front line long enough to know that.

I mustn't push this off on the younger members... At the very least, I'll need to handle the difficult negotiations until we know how things stand.

Henrietta's intent must have gotten through.

Either that, or they'd unconsciously formed a system of

cooperation. Their natural formation was to have Henrietta deal with native merchants, while the other three Crescent Moon League members fielded Adventurers.

The two younger members wrapped up merchandise, and a beaming Marielle accepted money. All three bowed their heads in unison, and the sale was complete.

As Henrietta watched them out of the corner of her eye, she continued responding to People of the Earth. Even if they accepted big orders for a hundred pieces every month, a guild the size of the Crescent Moon League couldn't fill them. Henrietta's current policy was to turn down the things that needed to be turned down.

Heaven only knows what would happen if we agreed to a contract like that... There are people like Master Shiroe in this world, gentlemen whose hearts are truly black, and one really can't be too careful—Hm?

Henrietta looked around.

Come to think of it, Shiroe wasn't there.

She was sure she'd made him take a change of clothes, but she didn't see an insolent young man with round glasses in the booth, or, for that matter, a small, black-haired girl.

"...Master Shiroe?"

After checking to make sure that there was a lull in the difficult customers, Henrietta stood on tiptoe, looking around the area. She was slightly taller than Marielle, but with the swollen torrent of people flowing down the corridor in front of the booth like a river, she couldn't see very far.

"Where are—"

"That's right. This merchandise is being sold on a trial basis. In order to get opinions from as many people as possible, sales are restricted to two items per person."

"I said I'd pay for it."

"That isn't the issue."

As Henrietta stood on tiptoe, straining her eyes, she heard Shiroe's cool voice.

Apparently he was handling a complaint from someone. Henrietta looked around, and, through a momentary gap in the waves of people, she spotted Shiroe at a booth on the other side of the corridor.

The long, hooded, sleeveless vest lent him a casual air, and with a thin, long-sleeved T-shirt layered on underneath it, Shiroe looked right. His expression was composed, and he was standing in the way of a merchant who was so irritated his head seemed about ready to release steam.

In the clothes the Crescent Moon League had made, Shiroe looked not medieval, but like a perfectly ordinary young Japanese guy. They looked so right on him that Henrietta felt a bit tickled, as though she'd

caught a glimpse of Shiroe's private life on Earth.

"Excuse me. Let me through, please."

She'd only been fascinated by that figure for a moment when her vision closed again, and Henrietta hurried over to the opposite booth, pushing her way through the customers who were enjoying the exhibition.

The shop belonged to the guild Cocoa Brown.

Shiroe stood surrounded by several staff members, facing a merchant who was trembling with anger, and he wasn't about to give an inch. Akatsuki stood just beside Shiroe, and it looked as though he was restraining her rather than shielding her.

Although Cocoa Brown was a clothing and ornaments guild, it had narrowed its focus down to accessories. It sold colorful polished pebbles, necklaces that were chains of silverwork, and earrings.

Accessories that struck even Henrietta as tasteful were set out on display, and they'd attracted her attention when she'd gone around greeting people before the doors opened. The prices were also astonishingly low. The Cocoa Brown member who'd been minding the booth had told her, "We're a small production guild, and the people from the combat guilds protect us, so we wanted to repay their kindness."

"Listen to what I'm telling you! If you sell those to me, your names will become widely known among the People of the Earth—"

"I'm sorry, but I need to ask you to leave."

Shiroe and the merchant were still arguing.

By that time, the people that were passing nearby had begun to realize that there was some sort of trouble. A growing semicircle of people was spontaneously forming around the Cocoa Brown booth.

In all probability, an unpleasant merchant was attempting to buy up Cocoa Brown's accessories in bulk. Two or three might not do any harm, but if anyone started buying them by the case, they'd never manage to keep the booth running for the rest of the time.

Of course, if they thought in terms of sales amounts or prioritized selling their entire stock, they could decide to just sell it all off. However, Cocoa Brown hadn't wanted to do that. They'd intended to have the residents of Akiba use their wears, and so they'd hastily introduced an item restriction and gotten into an argument with the merchant.

When it came to physical and magic specs, Adventurers were superior to People of the Earth. Even in terms of creating items, depending on subclass level, they could display expert-level skills.

However, arguments and negotiations weren't conducted through physical specs. Some people had temperaments that were suited to

them, and some didn't. In that case, it became something almost no one was even conscious of anymore: A problem for the player (the spirit), not the character (the body).

That was why Shiroe had stepped in.

He'd extended a helping hand.

I expect that isn't a bad guess, at any rate. But dear me, what a luckless Person of the Earth.

"Don't get full of yourself, stripling!"

By the time Henrietta pushed her way through the packed crowd and broke into the clear space in front of the Cocoa Brown booth, the People of the Earth merchant had finally snapped. He swung a big fist down at Shiroe.

Most of the gasps in the crowd came from People of the Earth.

Some averted their eyes.

However, the result was just what Henrietta had anticipated:

Shiroe gently stopped that fist with a fingertip.

True, Shiroe was an Enchanter. Enchanter was one of the magic-user main classes, and, like the other magic users, its stamina and physical strength were set extremely low. However, that was in comparison to other Adventurers of the same level in different classes.

When there was a level difference of more than fifty, and the other man was a Person of the Earth, even a magic user's agility and physical strength far surpassed those of his opponent. From Shiroe's perspective, the arrogant merchant's punch felt a bit like being hit with a balloon.

Apparently, since Shiroe had caught it gently, the fist the Person of the Earth had brought down hadn't even been counted as an attack. There was no sign that a guard was on its way.

Even as Shiroe stopped the middle-aged merchant's fist with his left arm, he had his right arm wrapped around Akatsuki's slim torso. He'd probably stopped her from drawing a *kunai*. Akatsuki was looking up at Shiroe with a disgruntled expression.

"You will leave, won't you?"

Shiroe smiled as he spoke.

However, Henrietta was a Bard, and she could clearly sense the invisible power that was gathering around him.

Shiroe was drawing mana from the air. Like Enchanters, Bards were in charge of supplying their companions with mana, so she'd sensed it quickly.

The expressions of several of the other Adventurers on the floor clearly showed that they had also picked up on the change in Shiroe.

Shiroe was smiling, but even with that tolerant smile on his face,

he was rapidly building an oppressive aura. *Eerie* was the only word to describe it.

He hadn't chanted a spell, though.

He'd only gathered mana in preparation for doing so.

As a result, this didn't count as an aggressive act. It wasn't the sort of thing that would bring down the guards, and there wasn't the slightest hint of battle in Shiroe's smiling expression.

However, even People of the Earth—who were much less sensitive than Adventurers when it came to combat or magic—could vaguely sense the aura of dense mana that Shiroe was radiating.

Even as they watched, the blood drained from the face of the middle-aged merchant. Pale-faced, he knocked Shiroe's hand away with the fist that had still been caught.

"Disgusting. I'm going home!"

With that parting shot, the middle-aged merchant left as though he were running away.

"He was quite a hot-blooded fellow, wasn't he?"

"You pressed him pretty hard as well, my liege."

"If I'd left him to you, Akatsuki, you would have taken his head off."

"After I'd cut off his arms and legs, yes."

Shiroe gently admonished Akatsuki, who was sulking with her cheeks puffed out.

As Shiroe shrugged, looking mildly appalled, the Cocoa Brown members thanked him. An adorably round dwarf girl clasped Shiroe's hand, so happy she was nearly in tears.

"Master Shiroe."

As she spoke, Henrietta was just a little startled. Her voice had sounded cross.

"What's the matter?"

"No... I mean..."

"My liege, she probably wants you to do your job."

"I see."

At Akatsuki's retort, Shiroe scratched the back of his head. The power of a moment ago had vanished completely. The spectators who'd gathered also scattered, seemingly satisfied by the scene.

"Miss Henrietta?"

"Yes, Master Shiroe?"

"This venue's pretty noisy, isn't it."

Henrietta, who'd instantly chased away the question of why she'd been irritated, tried to follow what Shiroe's words meant.

A noisy venue.

Did he mean the merchant? When she thought back, it seemed as though there had been some sales that had been very close to

arguments. Henrietta had assumed this was because they were dealing with People of the Earth, and because they were former Earthlings with very little experience... But did Shiroe see it differently?

What is Master Shiroe seeing?... But, come to think of it...

Henrietta wavered. Hadn't there been some information which she hadn't been sure whether or not to pass on to Shiroe?

"Master Shiroe, I..."

"The People of the Earth merchants are acting suspicious. I don't understand it, though. The resolution isn't high enough. It feels as if I don't have all the information."

On hearing Shiroe's murmuring, Henrietta understood: Shiroe had also noticed that indefinable oddness.

Akatsuki looked up at Shiroe, as if she was worried.

Henrietta tried to speak to him. His vision might give new shape to the doubt she was feeling.

However, by then, Shiroe had already shifted into action. He muttered a few words, and he wasn't talking to himself. He was asking a question, through empty space.

He was listening hard to a telechat.

Before long, he nodded. Turning to Henrietta, he informed her of the results in a clear voice:

"It sounds as though someone is attacking Akiba."

► 2

That day, Raynesia had been busy since morning.

Against her will, of course.

She should have been able to take things at a more leisurely pace during this festival.

She'd planned to spend it vegetatively, indolently, to be as bad as she wanted to be.

However, she'd been hard-pressed to respond to the letters of invitation and greetings that arrived one after another, and she hadn't even been able to take a decent nap. Elissa was flying about the room like a honeybee, pulling together and examining accessories from there, dresses from here...

But Elissa's actions weren't those of an empty-headed girl who loved fashion.

In aristocratic society, dining together and receiving visitors were important occasions that demonstrated rank. For example, when

worn, every single accessory sent a message to the other party through its value, its colors, and the meaning of its precious stones. One could say that society was the exchange of these vague, almost metaphorical messages.

For example, Raynesia was the second daughter of a duchy, but since the eldest daughter had already married below her station, she was treated as the eldest. In addition, although it had been generally advertised as being an apology to the Adventurers, as well as discipline, it was clear that she was living in this town as one of the nobles affiliated with Eastal, the League of Free Cities, and as a representative of the House of Cowen.

Since this was the case, when she gave official audiences, they could not be anything that would damage the dignity of the House of Cowen, the greatest noble family in the East. However, on the other hand, in order to preserve the shield of her status as a representative, it was desirable to let a few unofficial nuances remain as well. When she met with merchants, if she didn't wear something that had cost a suitable sum, they'd look down on her, and when she met with nobles, her pedigree and status would be questioned. If she knew the circumstances of the other party's house, she'd conduct complicated mind games, such as avoiding the color of the hair of the other party's family members who were also at court, or possibly matching it.

Elissa was selecting an outfit based on these particulars. No new maid treated as a lady-in-waiting could handle consideration on this level. This was a job for an Elder Maid like Elissa, who was well acquainted with the relationships between the aristocracy and prestigious families.

Naturally, she couldn't wear the same thing all day.

She was quite busy, changing clothes and accessories for each new visitor.

Nobles attached great importance to honor. For example, the act of having a request you'd made to someone's face turned down by the other party was strictly avoided among nobles. This was true even if the noble refusing the request was of higher rank than the noble who'd made the request. All requests from nobles should be granted, if only superficially.

To that end, the lower the rank of the petitioning noble, the more careful they were not to make requests the other party couldn't agree to. Higher-ranking nobles were expected to induce the other party to restrain themselves before they put their request into words. In these unspoken maneuvers, the important things were clothing, trifling light conversation, and the articles exchanged as gifts.

"Oh, gracious! Whatever are we going to do for the dinner party? I really cannot comprehend the Adventurers."

“Wouldn’t the usual be all right?”

“What do you mean by ‘the usual’?”

“Um... Something floaty?”

“Honestly, Princess Raynesia...”

Apparently even Elissa didn’t yet have a complete grasp of Adventurer etiquette and customs.

Common sense in Eastal dictated that feelings of gratitude must be conveyed through action. However, they were dealing with Adventurers. It wasn’t possible to expect them to understand the nobles’ style of gratitude: conferring decorations, or the blessing of being made to kneel. It would be even less possible to convey their intentions through clothing and subtleties of etiquette.

As that was the case, there was no way the dinner party could be anything but incredibly vague. When it came to food preparations, nearly half depended on the cooperation of the restaurants of Akiba, in addition to the palace cooks invited from Maihama. Had this been the court of Maihama, they probably would have been accused of slighting the invited guests, but apparently, in the fashion of the Adventurers, it wouldn’t be a problem.

Because everything went that way with them, there was no point in worrying about a dinner party that hadn’t even begun. Raynesia herself had planned to laze around until the actual event, without worrying about this and that. Of course, this was true even if she couldn’t deny the fact that it was also because she liked spacing out and not meeting people.

However, the situation had changed.

“Will this do, do you suppose? ...No, let’s add one more chain of jade. Just a moment; I know we received one for your birthday last year...”

Elissa’s voice was tense as well.

“You’re right. We mustn’t neglect the formalities...correct?”

The situation had been far too abrupt.

They’d received word that Lord Malves, a merchant from the West, would be visiting.

In addition to being a merchant, Lord Malves was a prominent aristocrat from the Holy Empire of Westlande. The status of Sergiad’s family wasn’t lower, but he certainly wasn’t someone they could treat lightly. On top of that, if he’d been sent at a time like this, they couldn’t deny the possibility that the House of Saimiya might be behind it.

The talk of a coup d’etat in the West must have been true, then.

Raynesia bit her lip.

Naturally, there was a reason behind the pressure she felt.

Two hundred and eighty years ago, the archipelago of Yamato had been united as one nation. The country had been governed by an imperial family, and its name had been the Westlande Imperial Dynasty. It was now known as the Ancient Dynasty. During this Ancient Dynasty, the imperial family had reigned in Yamato with enormous power.

However, the imperial house had fallen in the midst of the tumultuous changes of history, particularly the Ruquinjé affair. With the extinction of the imperial family, Yamato had lost the bond that had unified it as one nation, and it had split apart.

That said, even now, the nobles that governed Yamato were descended from the governing bodies of the days of the Ancient Dynasty. During the dark age that had followed the dynasty's collapse, when the human society of Yamato had lost its focus, it had been governed by the regional lords who'd served the Westlande Imperial Dynasty.

This was conspicuous in Eastal as well.

For example, the Cowen ducal family, into which Raynesia had been born, was one of only two remaining duchies in current Yamato. The title of *duke* had originally been bestowed on them by the Westlande imperial family. Each of the lords of Eastal governed the People of the Earth by right of titles that had been granted to their ancestors.

The unified nation of Yamato had collapsed, and the entities that drew the most influence from the Westlande Imperial Dynasty were Eastal, the League of Free Cities; and the Holy Empire of Westlande, which, between them, nearly divided Yamato in two.

The Holy Empire of Westlande was led by the House of Saimiya, which they acknowledged as the successors of the imperial family of Westlande.

Raynesia didn't personally know that much history, but she was aware that the House of Saimiya had been a sort of branch family of the ancient Westlande imperial family. The Saimiya family's bloodline had been split off from the imperial family of Westlande for political reasons, in order to preside over religious rituals. Because they had been split off and had transferred their residence to Ise, the House of Saimiya had survived the fall of the Westlande imperial family.

The Holy Empire of Westlande had raised up the House of Saimiya as its rulers and had styled itself the leader of Yamato. The intent to strongly promote itself as the rightful successor to the Westlande Imperial Dynasty was apparent from its name, the Holy Empire of Westlande.

However, naturally, not all the aristocrats of Yamato acknowledged the House of Saimiya as the imperial family itself. In fact, Eastal—with which Raynesia was affiliated, and in which the town of Akiba was located—hadn't accepted the House of Saimiya as their leader.

To them, the House of Saimiya was a branch family that had inherited the blood of the imperial family, and nothing more.

They took the stance that once split off, a bloodline could not be returned to its original place.

In any case, if the issue was one of whether or not bloodlines had been inherited, this was the ancient aristocracy: Due to complicated marital relationships, even the House of Cowen had the blood of the imperial family in its veins.

In the current situation, in which various factors came into play and tangled with each other, the House of Saimiya was not in a direct position of leadership over the Cowen duchy. However, although they might not be leaders per se, it was true that the family did share the blood of the leaders—the imperial family—and on their own they weren't a family that could be treated lightly or disregarded.

In the peerage system left behind by the Westlande Ancient Dynasty, the House of Saimiya was the one exceptional clan to outrank the duchies. Based on this political situation, although both the League of Free Cities in the East and the Holy Empire of Westlande of the West were still influenced by the imperial family, they had been locked in tense opposition.

Lord Malves, who had been dispatched here, was a great noble of the Holy Empire of Westlande and was in charge of their commerce. Raynesia seemed to recall hearing that he was also called the Prince of Noble Merchants, and that he had great power in marine transportation.

The objective of the dinner party was to deepen friendships with the Adventurers, but if he said he wanted to pay his respects, she had no choice but to invite him. With his rank, she couldn't just turn him down with a "Some other time, perhaps."

Raynesia shook her head, chasing away the premonition of trouble.

However, like Raynesia, Lord Malves was a Person of the Earth. He was also a noble who'd inherited the culture of the imperial family in Yamato, as she had. In that sense, it should be possible to deal with him on equal terms in the same arena: in aristocratic manners and culture.

At least...

Raynesia felt that all she could do was carry out her

responsibilities.

Her role was that of a daughter of the House of Cowen who had been dispatched to Akiba; in other words, the role of “Princess Raynesia.” She thought that if she were able to repay Akiba for saving her homeland in some way, she would probably have done her duty.

Raynesia stood, flaring out the skirt of a dress that was as white and misty as a light snowfall.

She didn’t know what this noble of the West wanted, but she intended to bear the full brunt of it herself.

► 3

“What...?”

“It’s an attack. Most likely some sort of psychological or information warfare. What lousy taste.”

Shiroe snorted.

Not only was it tasteless, it was rude.

Their methods were terribly transparent.

Their forces had entered Akiba, and the goal of their attack was to destroy trust in the Round Table Council and to weaken the bonds that existed in the town. However, their methods were far too slipshod.

Was it because the enemy who was conducting this attack was incompetent? Or...

“...Are they arrogant?”

At Shiroe’s murmur, Akatsuki cocked her head.

Seeing this, Shiroe waved his hand slightly.

“Never mind, just put the *kunai* away.”

“But my liege...”

“We won’t need it this time.”

Reluctantly, Akatsuki slipped the rough blade back inside her skirt. Averting his gaze from an accidental glimpse of her calf, Shiroe turned to Henrietta.

“The town of Akiba is under attack.”

“Yes.”

Henrietta nodded. Her expression was tense.

Henrietta had also been vaguely aware of it, Shiroe realized. In that case, he decided, it would be best to fill her in on the circumstances, up to a point.

“Their methods are probably to infiltrate, then to engineer mild disturbances and spread rumors. Their objective is to damage trust in the Round Table Council.”

“...Let’s take action as soon as possible. Depending on the situation, we might have to cancel the festival...”

“That wouldn’t be a good move.”

Shiroe responded to Henrietta, who had jumped to conclusions.

“If the festival is cancelled, people will doubt the Round Table Council’s ability to cope with crises, and as a result, they’ll lose confidence in it. That’s just what they want. The best course of action here is to get through by minimizing the trouble. That means the festival has to go on.”

“That’s... Yes, that’s true.”

Henrietta’s expression looked a little gray.

The fact that they were taking an attack from an unknown enemy, in a form that wasn’t directly visible, was putting her under that much pressure. Shiroe wasn’t entirely immune to that pressure, either. He could “see” a bit more of it than Henrietta, so he was calm. That was all.

Shiroe had a hunch that this attack came from the People of the Earth. There were various reasons for this, but the greatest was the sense of wrongness in the key phrase “loss of trust in the governing organization.”

Most of the Adventurers of Yamato, including Shiroe, were Japanese in the real world.

Although this wasn’t the sort of thing one could brag about, to Japanese people, trust in governing organizations wasn’t valuable enough to be worth damaging. Of course, Japan’s actual administrative and police organizations provided some of the highest-level services in the world. If these organizations stopped working, there would clearly be trouble that very day. However, didn’t most people feel as if those administrative end services had no connection to the governing organizations? To the Japanese, government incompetence was already taken for granted. The idea of attacking confidence in a governing organization was itself un-Japanese, and in Yamato, it wasn’t at all like the Adventurers.

In addition, the crudeness of the attack told him something else.

At the very least, the hostile People of the Earth didn’t think this attack could inflict a devastating blow on the town of Akiba and the Adventurers themselves. Of course not: The Adventurers wouldn’t be weakened immediately just because the festival failed, law and order in the town grew a bit worse, and the Round Table Council was criticized as incompetent.

Since this attack wasn’t by nature the sort of attack that would settle things on its own, what seemed to be their current goal—damaging confidence in the Round Table Council—should be

considered no more than a foundation for their actual goal.

In that case, what was their true goal in this situation? What would benefit the attackers?

It was likely that it lay in being able to negotiate with Akiba under advantageous conditions.

That was probably the goal of the merchant traders from the West who had been mentioned in his telechat with Minori. Since the Round Table Council had concluded a treaty with Eastal, the western People of the Earth would need to sign a treaty with the town of Akiba as well, to keep the others from monopolizing the profit. In order to improve the conditions of that treaty, they were interfering as a sort of preemptive strike.

Since they'd been able to mobilize merchants on a scale like this one, a wealthy merchant or noble with sufficient capital was probably in command.

When he'd checked with Isaac, he'd received information that one group of important figures who fit the description had arrived that morning with the intent of staying in town.

He could understand it.

Depending on the situation, it would be possible for the strategy to produce a certain effect.

However, Shiroe thought, for precisely that reason, it was crude and completely lacking in aesthetics.

In mobilizing this many people, then attempting to make the negotiations go their way through threats, intimidation, and groundless rumors, they'd given away their origin.

"From the West...?"

"Don't mention it to anyone just yet."

In the back of the Crescent Moon League booth, having finished his explanation, Shiroe made a request of Henrietta.

"I won't, but what are you going to do next, Master Shiroe?"

"Well..."

Shiroe tried to continue, but faltered.

Shiroe was one of the eleven guild masters who made up the Round Table Council. However, the Round Table Council was an organization of self-government, and it had only the trust of the town of Akiba. Would it be proper for him to conduct defensive activities at his own discretion, or not? Shiroe thought about it for a little while, but stopped partway through.

He'd reached the conclusion that the answer to that question

wouldn't present itself easily, and he had given up.

Besides, we should get by without seeing blood this time. ...They came to stir things up using aggressive methods, so they've probably considered the possibility of being repaid in kind.

...This slightly irresponsible thought was also present.

If you get hit, hit back. That was only natural. This world was far stricter than Earth when it came to handing out retribution. Either way, they'd need to use defensive tactics this time around. Self-defense was a natural, self-evident right.

"Fight. Of course."

The sense of wrongness Shiroe had felt. The feeling of roughness that had continued since yesterday. The inquiries to the Production Guild Liaison Committee had made it clear: The number of incidents that needed to be dealt with was increasing rapidly.

It wasn't limited to disputes in town. On the contrary: Cases stemming from direct quarrels were only the tip of the iceberg. For example, applications that required only one form had been split across two forms and submitted. Town entry procedures were being used to monopolize personnel. Taxes were being fudged slightly. They were attempting to pass bribes. Each individual thing was simply a troublesome triviality, not worth bothering about, but an intent to maximize these things was assailing Akiba.

Since it was so roundabout, and it was difficult to pinpoint malicious intent, even the Adventurers who noticed it had been unable to decide whether it was truly a premeditated attack or not. However, this sort of trivial contact had piled up and was attempting to bind the PGLC—and, by extension, the Round Table Council.

Since they weren't able to identify it as an attack, they couldn't defend. The enemy was making the greatest possible use of that vulnerability.

So where was the point on which the enemy was concentrating their effort?

Right now, it was any point where the Liaison Committee was fielding paperwork of some sort. Intentionally false reports and multiple reports were being turned in with regard to duties such as the town gates, the storehouse facilities, and the flea market patrols, whittling down its processing capacity.

It was probably best to consider that points where Adventurers and People of the Earth interacted were being attacked as well. They were attempting to sour the festival and the town's atmosphere by disrupting areas where communication would take place.

With either, the only countermeasure was to increase the number of staff on-site. On top of that, efficiency and flexible organization

would be key.

All of Akiba's self-governing organizations, beginning with the Round Table Council, were composed of volunteers. Considering that, they displayed extraordinary problem-solving abilities, but this was only when those organizations had sufficient people and morale. Being short staffed made the fatigue on-site more serious, and a lack of morale reduced their very energy to work. In addition, without proper placement and an awareness of the goal, they probably wouldn't even be sure which way they were supposed to go.

Which meant they'd need to set up a system of command and inject personnel.

Then, too, it wouldn't be possible to stop the next attack with that alone. Of course, the enemy might not play that hand, but Shiroe thought that if it had been him, he'd have another attack waiting as insurance. A move that would disparage the Round Table Council's practical abilities.

Dispassionately, Shiroe flipped through the cards in his mind.

The theater of war is vast. Each individual piece of this infiltration is negligible, just minor trouble. ...However, the battlefield is all of Akiba. The range is too wide; I can't handle it on my own. Even if I asked everyone in Log Horizon, we wouldn't be enough. That said, having the Round Table Council take action would be a bad move in and of itself. It's likely that that's exactly what the enemy wants: A situation in which the Round Table Council panics over trivial business issues at stalls.

Of course he'd probably need to contact the appropriate parties and ask for their cooperation, but he couldn't let the rank and file of the Round Table Council realize they were in a state of emergency. Simply raising the level of alert would eat up some of their processing capacity. Since this was a saturation attack on the processing abilities of the Round Table Council and the PGLC, carelessly raising the security level would play right into the enemy's hands.

Ideally, we'd get rid of the incident itself. Right...

That was the ideal outcome.

But how? In his mind, he positioned the forces he had, then ran simulations. Plans that failed were scrapped, the conditions changed, and another simulation run. When he stopped breathing, the noise around him grew distant, and he was enveloped in a world of silence. In the midst of the accelerating mock battles, Shiroe groped for the balance point he knew had to exist somewhere.

Even Akatsuki, who was peeking up at him as if she were worried, had disappeared for Shiroe now.

The repeated examination of conditions was erasing the light and sound from his world.

...But nothing worked.

The enemy's attacks were too incompatible with Shiroe.

The enemy was barely thinking at all. Of course, their commander probably had a vague overall objective, but each individual attack was executed nearly on impulse, in all sorts of places. These weren't pinpoint breakthrough attacks based on a detailed strategy. They were ad-lib attacks executed at random.

Not only that, but they'd managed to deduce the true state of the attacks only after the enemy had completed their battle formation and hit them with a preemptive strike. Shiroe the Strategist used advance adjustments as a weapon, and his affinity with this style was the highest it could possibly be.

Agh... I hate enemies like this.

He'd declared to Akatsuki and the others that they would fight, but the situation was worse than he'd thought. The fact that the enemy was acting haphazardly, or in other words, at random, was built into the strategy. He couldn't make predictions. If the enemy had been planning to attempt to break through at a certain point, he could have deduced what that point was and concentrated his defenses there. That was precisely what made it possible for recruited soldiers to stop a vast, hostile army. However, this enemy was an epidemic of simultaneous terrorist acts. Not only that, but it was terrorism with no malice at its extremities. Shiroe didn't have the ability to figure out what each individual enemy just happened to be planning.

At times like this, I guess there's nothing for it but to give up, at least temporarily.

Shiroe mentally switched gears.

He gave up on dealing with everything.

What couldn't be done couldn't be done. With that as his premise, he'd do what he could.

There was no time, either. It was already past noon. If they didn't take steps within the next hour, the situation would probably grow bad enough that even the residents of Akiba would sense the abnormality.

If he was going to find something to counter this enemy with, under these conditions...

"Hm? Well, if it isn't Mister Shiro. You've been at the Crescent Moon League booth? That's right, of course."

When Shiroe turned, there was Soujirou, his old friend and leader of the West Wind Brigade, standing with the crowd at his back. Today—possibly as townwear—Soujirou was wearing traditional Japanese clothes: a *kasuri*-patterned kimono and navy blue *hakama* trousers. His

hair, which was tied back in more of a ponytail than a traditional topknot, swung behind him, and of course, he was carrying his long and short *uchigatana* swords.

“It’s been quite some time, sir.” “Hello!” “Pleased to meet you.” “Who’s he?” “You know. From Log Horizon...” “Oh!”

The high-pitched voices behind him came from the girl groupies who were always with Soujiro.

“We went to the cake shop you told us about, Mister Shiro. Talk about fantastic bonuses! They gave us sixteen whole cakes. We couldn’t quite get through them all, so we called our guild mates and told them to come have some free cake, but the more members showed up, the more cakes they brought out. They were a really nice guild! ...Um, huh?”

Shiroe felt the strength go out of his knees; he almost sank to the floor.

Those weren’t bonuses. They were just adding to your challenge menu, to suit the number of people. The comeback had made it as far as his throat, but Soujiro didn’t seem to have noticed a thing.

“About the time they’d brought out thirty whole cakes, they ran out of stock, I think. We all ate them together, and they were delicious. I liked the orange mousse. That one was really good, wasn’t it? It had something like the lingering scent of summer to it.”



Oh, geez. Soujirou is such a...

Even as he felt himself going limp, Shiroe set a hand on Soujirou's shoulder as he delivered his report.

"What is it, Mister Shiro?"

"Nothing. You came at a good time, Soujirou. I have an issue that's perfect for you."

The enemy was developing a haphazard saturation maneuver that incorporated randomness.

In which case, it would be fitting to go beyond randomness and apply unconsciousness to that line of defense.

The ideal talent for the job was right before Shiroe's eyes.

► 4

Ending the telechat, Minori clenched her fists tightly.

Her fear had been right on the mark.

Akiba—Minori and the others—was under attack.

"So it's true?"

As Calasin asked the question, his voice sounded as if he'd had a shock. Minori nodded.

"Shiroe thinks so, too."

Calasin bit a fingernail, glanced at the mountain of documents with a stern expression, then began to think again.

It had already been eight hours since Minori had entered the office. They'd worked straight through from early morning nearly without breaks, and as a result, the greater part of the towers of documents had disappeared. At this point, they were condensed and packed into the document crates in the corner of the room.

However, for that very reason, their situation had become clear.

They hadn't noticed it because the reports had been scattered and were arriving separately, but merchants from the West made up more than 15 percent of the total number of attendees.

Although large, the number itself wasn't a problem. The problem was the fact that that 15 percent of the incoming population had caused more than 60 percent of the trouble.

This room was the department responsible for the Libra Festival. In other words, it was the control room.

Before the fact or after it, information gathered here in the form of reports.

This "report" format had been the source of their error. Processing

the wide variety of reports was putting them under pressure.

Of course documents were important.

“Leave a record” was an ironclad rule of clerical work, and in this world, using paper was the only way to do it.

However, the Production Guild Liaison Committee had been overwhelmingly short on processing capacity. The organization hadn’t been built to be capable of leaving a record as precise as the one they’d initially planned for, and the system hadn’t been applied skillfully enough. More than anything, they’d been crushingly short on the necessary personnel.

This weakness had been exploited.

For example, the simple oral survey of cargo when entering the town. The license issuing procedure for those participating in the flea market. The procedure to report items being sold. The procedure to use the publicly run storehouses managed by the Round Table Council. Issuing cargo exchange receipts on-site. All of these locations were understaffed.

The delay triggered stress, and stress invited trouble.

They’d thought this confusion had been caused inevitably—in other words, unintentionally—by the unexpected increase in People of the Earth merchants. That is to say, the Liaison Committee had been blaming themselves for having been unable to anticipate this crowd.

However, as they sorted out the documents, they saw that the same western merchants had intentionally requested multistep or redundant paperwork.

Someone, or possibly several someones, was trying to put stress on the system.

When Calasin had checked, the guilds who were on town patrol—D.D.D. and the Knights of the Black Sword—said they’d also been rendered unable to move by dealing with a sudden increase in fights and disputes. At the same time, all through the town, they’d heard baseless rumors blaming the Round Table Council for incompetence.

At this point, with Calasin’s permission, Minori had contacted Shiroe. She’d been worried that not sharing the information would do harm.

Then, on having received that information, Shiroe had determined that someone was attacking them, and, unfortunately, he’d given his support to Minori’s guess.

“You’ll be going back to join Shiroe, won’t you, Minori?”

Calasin’s question was just what she’d anticipated, and so Minori also took the attitude she’d planned on and shook her head.

“I won’t go back to Shiroe.”

“Huh?”

“I’m staying here,” Minori repeated.

The astonishment in Calasin's expression was only to be expected.

When attacked, groups returned to their leader. It was a defensive response dating back to the time when humans were animals. Guilds were no exception.

Under the circumstances, the commonsense response was for all members to return to their guild leader and follow his instructions as a group. This was less a type of group discipline than a textbook move. They were on the receiving end of a mysterious social infiltration invasion. In fact, Calasin had just issued an order to summon all guild members whose hands were free to the area around the guild center.

On top of that, Minori was still young. Even she understood that Calasin had thought it was only natural for her to return to the wings of her "guardian," Shiroe.

However, she had made up her mind to stay here.

Minori's ability to organize documents was already equal to that of a full-fledged clerical worker. Of course, she'd had help from a few of Shopping District 8's younger members, but it was true that Minori had cleared the flood of documents that had beset the office. Calasin had no reason to refuse her.

Pretending not to register Calasin's worried gaze, Minori drew a deep breath. This was a battlefield.

But in her eyes, the mountains of documents in the office looked like something else.

The connection came naturally to her mind, and a new vision rose up.

In other words, it's just like that.

The problem was their lack of processing ability.

In concept, it was equivalent to a lack of recovery ability.

She remembered murderous intent that chilled her spine and a suffocating sense of tension. Slowly, she opened and clenched her hand, intentionally helping her blood circulate. Minori was currently visualizing a raid.

Just remembering made her throat dry, and her temperature was falling.

All she had to do was what had been done at Ragranda, Choushi, and Zantleaf. To mimic what she'd seen Shiroe do.

"I'll stay here and handle the storehouse work. Would it be all right if we had them bring all the storehouse paperwork in, too?"

"Huh? Oh. Yes, I see, you're right. ...Of course, if you'll do it, that would be terrific."

Calasin gave the order to the young man Taro, who was nearby.

Storehouse meant the materials storehouses managed by the Round Table Council. The small and mid-sized guilds could rent the storehouses by the month, and the facilities had been created at a relatively early stage after the establishment of the Round Table Council.

After the Catastrophe, the world had changed, and now the quality of materials affected the quality of created items. As a result, it had become important for producers to judge materials carefully before buying.

Before, in the case of tomato items, no matter what kind of tomatoes they were, the quality of the finished food had been the same (although it had been nothing more than soggy rice crackers.) However, at present, if you used damaged tomatoes, the tomato salad would be only as good as a salad made with damaged tomatoes. It would inevitably taste bad. As a result, at present, it had grown more necessary to look at an item directly and confirm its quality before making your purchase.

That meant that, unlike before, large storehouses with solid management systems were necessary. Big guilds could run their own storehouses, but small and mid-sized guilds didn't have that kind of strength. In response to requests from these smaller guilds, the Round Table Council had established several large storehouses, and it continued to manage them.

During the Libra Festival, these storehouses had been made available to People of the Earth as well.

The service was necessary for People of the Earth merchants who'd come with freight wagons.

Much of their merchandise consisted of bulky items and the types of things that couldn't be left alone at inn stables. In a storehouse cooled by summoning Heavenly Winter Robes—high-level ice spirits—items would also stay a bit fresher.

However, it was also true that since they'd been opened to the People of the Earth, the procedures themselves had grown more complicated. If they didn't record the details of the items placed in their care, they couldn't be responsible. In addition, the storehouses had been designed on the assumption that a fixed amount would be taken out each morning and what remained unsold would be put back at night. They hadn't assumed frequent use, such as merchandise being removed each time a sale was made.

The plain truth was that the burden placed on the contact personnel far exceeded their processing abilities. It was a typical example of the attack Akiba was experiencing.

"Sorry about the wait, Minori."

“Hi, Touya.”

Touya had entered the office without so much as a greeting, and Minori nodded to him.

The twins had each other’s addresses registered at the very top of their friend lists. To them, these were irreplaceable. They’d contacted each other via telechat so often that they could perform the operations unconsciously, to the point where it had gone past the territory of a direct call and was beginning to border on telepathy.

“Calasin, this is my twin brother, Touya. I had him come to help.”

“Yes. I haven’t seen you for a while. I’m sorry, and thanks in advance.”

“Roger that. Okay, Minori, I’m off.”

With a hasty greeting, Touya set his bag down and left the office. Minori didn’t ask where he was going.

Merchandise claim checks from several publicly run storehouses had been delivered to this floor. As she and Calasin had discussed earlier, Touya had probably gone to pick up those checks.

Before long, it was likely that all sorts of files would begin to stream into the office at double the previous speed. The claim checks from the storehouse group would be brought to the office, in addition to the reports that were arriving from the flea market.

They’d created space in the office by organizing the current paperwork, and now they would process these vast quantities of documents here in parallel.

That was the battlefield Minori had chosen.

“Calasin, take care of this as well, please.”

Minori passed a list of high-priority reports to him. It had “urgent” written in red in its top right corner. Calasin was flustered, but he nodded and began to rapidly glance through it.

Calasin was a guild leader with the sort of business abilities even Shiroe held in high esteem. He fielded hot matters, the sort Minori couldn’t handle, regarding materials entrusted to them—such as the fact that the same huge heap of potatoes had been withdrawn twice—with short telechats, settling matters by compensating for damages.

As she watched him, Minori was sure of it:

Running back to Shiroe right now would be a poor move.

Now, when the battle lines were being overwhelmed, was the time for the rear guard to display iron determination that continuously supported the vanguard. The rear guard had a duty to trust the vanguard.

I don’t know whether I’ll be any help, but...

Even so, at this moment, there was no one in this office. Only

Calasin and two Shopping District 8 volunteers. Even with the additions of Minori and Touya, there were only five of them.

This was the core of the Libra Festival, and yet there were just five staff members.

The only instruction Shiroe had given her was to meet up with Touya.

Minori thought about the intent that might hold.

The first thing she'd picked up on was the message that the circumstances currently bearing down on Akiba weren't the sort of danger that would cause direct, physical damage. If the situation had held that kind of peril, Shiroe would have told her to join them at any cost. If necessary, he would have sent someone to get her.

However, after the relief, the next thing she'd sensed was the message that she'd been given her freedom.

This didn't simply mean that he'd granted her freedom of movement. Minori had been given this concession after sharing the information that they were under attack, and she interpreted this to mean that he was hoping she would act as reinforcements.

A small expectation from distant Shiroe.

The possibility might have been no more than a misunderstanding, but it kindled a blaze in Minori's soul.

But if that's true... If Shiroe's hoping for something, even a very little something, from me, then I...

In this office, she'd imitate Shiroe.

That was what Minori had resolved.

She'd recreate Shiroe's controlled encounter.

There would be no point in having two Shiroes in the same place, but here, where there was no Shiroe, she might find value in imitating him.

The people in charge of reception at the storehouses, who were continuing to take complaints from the People of the Earth, were the vanguard tank. That would probably make Calasin—who was using the time they bought him to resolve the vanguard's problems—the healer.

On this battlefield, the very best Minori could do was to sort the problems by size, foresee the next move, and shape the information so that everything ran smoothly.

She couldn't be the vanguard or the healer.

Even though her ideals were high, all she was really doing was organizing paperwork, transferring its content to another piece of paper and distributing it. She felt a furious helplessness and irritation at herself in the pit of her stomach, but she valiantly froze the

emotions.

She was a middle schooler. If she was incompetent, that was only natural.

Besides, Shiroe had taught her that nothing was more useless than irritation in the middle of a conflict or the tormenting oneself therefore. She couldn't betray him.

The flow of battle isn't something you read. It's something you become.

She remembered Shiroe's kind voice. He'd been laughing, as if he were joking.

Become the flow...

To Minori, right now, "combat" and "the flow" were the continuous sequence of documents that were brought in one after another, and the telechats that flew in asking for instructions. She had to become these things.

Worry about nothing.

Think about nothing.

Become the documents themselves, the solution itself.

As she chased a sensation she could feel only faintly, Minori threw herself into the work in front of her.

► 5

A resplendent atmosphere enveloped the dinner party venue.

This was the great hall on the first floor of Water Maple Manor, where Raynesia lived. The manor had been created by repairing one of Akiba's many destroyed buildings, which the Cowen duchy of Maihama had purchased when Raynesia was sent to Akiba.

The building had been very nearly in ruins, so they'd kept only the basic structure and redesigned it in the style of an aristocratic People of the Earth manor.

As an official residence, the manor sometimes housed guests, and regular business, including meetings and appraisals of specialty products, was often conducted here. As a result, although it was Raynesia's private residence, it had been built on a rather large scale. There were three halls, a total of eighty rooms, and as a rule, there were more than thirty servants.

Now, just before the largest event this residence had ever seen, the number of staff had ballooned to a number that was beyond comparison with the usual thirty. This was a banquet on a huge scale:

The chefs and bards and serving girls they'd summoned from Maihama hadn't been enough, and they'd hastily recruited and mobilized kitchen staff and a wide variety of artisans in Akiba.

As a matter of fact, not all those who'd responded to the advertisement had been People of the Earth.

Although there weren't many of them, there were Adventurers among the Chefs, the servers, the musicians, and the behind-the-scenes staff. Adventurers' income level was high. The wages Raynesia's people had proposed had been based on People of the Earth standards, and they hadn't dreamed that Adventurers would respond to the advertisement, but this was the town of Akiba. Some Adventurers had stepped up, mostly for fun.

It was probably more than half in a spirit of volunteering. As these Adventurers worked busily behind the scenes of the grand banquet, some grew closer to People of the Earth of the opposite gender who were working alongside them and rather charming relationships began, but that's another story.

"Thank you very much."

Raynesia smiled and bowed to the Adventurer in front of her. The young Adventurer averted his gaze brusquely and muttered, "Nah, anybody would've done that."

Apparently the young man had acted as rear-guard support and participated in the encircling operation during the Zantleaf War. All Raynesia could do was express her gratitude, but after all, the day's dinner party existed in order to formally convey that gratitude.

"Thanks to you and your people, Maihama and the League of Cities were saved. I am eternally grateful to you."

She lifted her skirt very slightly, bowing her head.

Seeing this, the young man waved a hand, interrupting her and speaking rapidly: "You don't have to thank us all over the place. It wasn't anything big. We're Adventurers, and anybody would've done it, and we got paid. Plus...it wasn't all that much trouble."

Then the young man, whose face had gone red, said, "Just don't worry about it. Not even a little, okay?!" He sounded uncomfortable, and he left in a hurry.

"They all seem rather gauche, don't they?"

"Yes, they do... They really do."

Raynesia responded to Elissa, who was waiting behind her.

Many of the Adventurers—particularly the young men—seemed to be shy. Most knights were romantics, but they were so absorbed in their chivalry that they tended to force their own way of doing things onto others.

On that point, the young Adventurers often grew flustered and ran

away when Raynesia thanked them.

At first she'd wondered whether they were shunning her out of dislike, but she'd come to understand that that wasn't the case. In Eastal, she'd been called "a beautiful princess filled with melancholy," treated as a decoration, and admired for her beauty. Here in Akiba, apparently, she was the object of a similar, yet different, longing.

The Adventurers were just bashful and self-conscious.

Elissa had laughed—"My, my, *my*. They all show their shyness like children"—but Raynesia thought it was rather nice. It was better than being fawned over; it gave her a light, pleasant feeling and left her with a good impression of them.

There were about three hundred invited guests in the hall.

Two-thirds were Adventurers, and one-third were People of the Earth. The latter included shopkeepers who traded extensively in the town, and the litigation officers of the Kunie tribe, who were in charge of bank services. There were also commercial representatives from trading companies who'd traveled in from eastern territories for today's festival.

The hall was filled with savory aromas.

The main point of this dinner party was light conversation, but the main subject—the food—hadn't been neglected, either. Apparently the Chefs who'd come from Maihama had outdone themselves for Raynesia. They were creating sumptuous dishes, as if showing off for Akiba's Adventurers.

Dishes like fish soup and veal with raspberry sauce had been rediscovered. They were traditional dishes that had been handed down in Zantleaf, but before the Revolution, they'd been created from the item creation menu.

Her memories of how food had tasted at the time were already misty, but naturally, the items had been dull and flavorless, and the only remaining impression was a dreary one. It was bad enough that she marveled at the fact that they'd kept themselves alive on food which tasted like that.

However, there were many dishes that they'd stopped being able to make after the Revolution. If they looked at the necessary recipe on the item creation menu, they could tell what sort of ingredients it was made from, but they couldn't tell how those ingredients needed to be prepared, or in what order, to reproduce a dish that even superficially resembled the one they'd made from the item creation menu.

It could be said that the Catastrophe had exposed the ignorance of the People of the Earth. At that point, they'd been shown their own warped shapes: They couldn't even make with their own hands the items they'd previously been able to make with the item creation

menu. However, the Chefs of Maihama had tackled that situation boldly. In an attempt to create local specialties when the actual preparation methods were unclear, they'd worked to form hypotheses from the lists of ingredients used.

Possibly as a result of the pains they'd taken, most of the guests here today seemed satisfied. Raynesia went around the venue, introducing People of the Earth to Adventurers and presenting Adventurers to People of the Earth.

At this point, the dinner party seemed to be a success, and it looked as if it was going quite well. Raynesia's grandfather Sergiad had said that the bonds between Adventurers and People of the Earth would become Eastal's treasure.

Raynesia thought he might be right.

However, that result would come about only if both parties took care of those bonds and polished them on a daily basis. Raynesia thought her role was to shower the bonds with affection.

That might have been her grandfather's purpose in sending her to Akiba.

Even though Raynesia herself only wanted to live an idle life indolently, comfortably, or possibly limply...

"Princess..."

"What is it, Elissa?"

Waiting for a break in the crowd, the lady-in-waiting who'd been standing behind Raynesia spoke to her. It probably had something to do with the maid who'd run up to Elissa and given her a message a moment ago; her color wasn't good.

Raynesia braced herself for bad news.

She'd been ready for it ever since she'd heard that Malves would be coming.

Raynesia hadn't greeted Malves at this dinner party. She'd been informed that he hadn't yet reached the venue, and this hinted at the possibility that he was the true form of the bad news.

"It's bad news."

"...I'd rather not hear it, but tell me."

"They say Lord Malves is on his way here now, and that he will reach the hall in ten minutes."

"I see."

She'd expected this. The information depressed her and stressed her out, but it wasn't really bad news.

"And..."

"What is it?"

On her best behavior, Raynesia prompted her messenger.

“As a matter of fact, Lord Malves’s ship is offshore from Akiba, and he has rather a lot of material. He says he’d like to have that cargo placed in a storehouse. But...”

“Is there some sort of problem?”

“Yes, as you know, this came up suddenly, and there really is a large quantity... But in any case, storehouse depositing is a service intended for Adventurers.”

As she spoke, Elissa sounded troubled.

That was only natural. If some sort of problem came up, she’d have to advise Lord Malves. It was Raynesia’s duty to mediate between the People of the Earth and the Adventurers.

The hum of voices in the hall grew louder.

No doubt a large delegation had arrived. Apparently Malves was here, and she hadn’t even managed to hear the report in its entirety.

Taking Elissa with her, Raynesia crossed the hall filled with orchestral music, bowing to Adventurers as she went. A man in the prime of life had entered through the large double doors.

Raynesia hadn’t made his acquaintance, but there was no doubt that he was Malves, the aristocrat from the Holy Empire of Westlande.

“I’m so pleased you could come.”

In a light, graceful gesture, Raynesia pinched up her skirt and lowered her head deferentially.

In the aristocracy of the People of the Earth, Raynesia’s position was a very delicate one. As a daughter of the House of Cowen, the greatest noble in the East, she was in a position to receive great respect. In addition, her beauty had earned her the admiration of high society as “the rose princess.”

However, she was a woman, and in the aristocracy, it was unthinkable for a woman to hold an official public post.

Of course, Raynesia was living in the town of Akiba on official business, to act as a go-between for People of the Earth and Adventurers, and to lay the groundwork for a variety of negotiations. However, officially, an announcement had been made that it was discipline for the arbitrary decision she’d made to ask for reinforcements from the Adventurers without permission from the League.

Raynesia was active in Akiba as the representative of the eastern People of the Earth, but she had no official rank. She was only “the daughter of the House of Cowen, who is currently confined to a second residence.” This meant that when dealing with Malves, a great noble of the Holy Empire of Westlande, she had to curtsy quite deeply.

“My, what beauty. If my memory serves me, you must be Princess Raynesia, daughter of the House of Cowen.”

“Yes, Master Malves. I’m deeply grateful to be honored with your presence at my residence this evening, during this banquet to celebrate the autumn festival.”

Flawlessly hiding her innermost thoughts, Raynesia modestly lowered her eyes.

To be honest, her first impression had been a bad one.

It might even have been the worst one possible: Malves was an aristocrat with a face like kneaded white clay. Raynesia had met aristocrats from the Holy Empire of Westlande several times when she accompanied her grandfather, and every time, she’d felt a visceral distortion. She felt the same thing now, with Malves.

When it came to handing down ancient noble culture, the Holy Empire of Westlande was far more conservative than the East, and even the men often sprinkled themselves with cologne and wore rouge. Of course, it was probably quite becoming on some of them, but according to the customs of Eastal, the cosmetics were antiquated and bizarre.

Raynesia wasn’t one to talk much about others’ personal appearance. However, rather than a simple issue of appearance, Malves’s seemed to be the result of a certain inward aspect that had bled through to the surface.

“It’s a marvelous banquet. It looks quite the success.”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you.”

However, as a daughter of the nobility, Raynesia had spoken with a variety of diplomats and envoys. The skill children born into noble families most needed to acquire was the art of smiling and conversing with an innocent air, no matter how much one disliked the other party.

“And yet, how shall I put it? It strikes me as a touch too disorderly.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

The noble’s voice held a hint of contemptuous laughter. Raynesia raised her eyes, very slightly.

“Oh, the idea that nobles would appear at the same banquet as commoners. One might call it the fearlessness peculiar to the East, where they’ve inherited the blood of barbarians... Ha-ha-ha! ...Here now, I’ll thank you not to come near me. Shoo, shoo.”

“I’m terribly sorry. The East is ill-versed in that sort of refinement, which is why this banquet became as it is. I’m not certain whether its flavor will please you, but would you care for some Eastern liquor?”

She certainly wasn't accustomed to hearing such contemptuous speech, but it was nothing she couldn't let slide. Most of the members of the League of Free Cities were local city-states that had been conquered when the Westlande Imperial Dynasty was established. In consequence, since the old days, the large Western cities with imperial palaces—Minami and Ikoma—had treated them as rather backward, barbaric regions.

Even then, Eastal was better off than some. Ezzo was despised as a savage land where no human being had ever set foot, as true barbarians. It wasn't without cause that, after its independence, Ezzo had declared itself an empire and stirred up animosity toward central Yamato.

Raynesia tilted her head slightly, then poured liquor into the cup the ornately dressed Malves held. He narrowed his eyes at Raynesia in a rapturous smile, then insolently touched her silver hair.

Anger flared up in Raynesia's immediate vicinity.

It was the Adventurers who were closest to Raynesia and Malves. Young, armored warriors holding glasses and dapper swordsmen with long weapons at their hips turned dangerous eyes their way.

Their glances meant, *Should we butcher this impertinent white pig?* Inwardly, Raynesia giggled at them.

Down to the last man, the Adventurers really were free, and as open-hearted as birds. Raynesia was happy that she'd grown able to understand their thoughts.

However, using only her eyes, Raynesia declined their silent offer. There were offers that one could not take advantage of precisely because they were kind. If they harmed a great noble of the West, they'd all suffer for it, and she'd anticipated sticky speech of this sort.

Unless Raynesia kept control of the situation, at best, this aristocrat would be thrown out, and at worst, he might be put to the sword. That would be an unfortunate ending for both East and West, for both People of the Earth and Adventurers.

If all he did was speak sarcastically, she was prepared to go along with him for as long as it took.

That was what Raynesia thought.

After all, she liked being lazy. She was confident in her ability to let entire conversations go in one ear and out the other. She'd even attempt to bite back unladylike yawns. Of course, she'd have to be prepared to face Elissa's anger afterward, but even so.

"Well, never mind. Princess. I want you to make haste and prepare a storehouse. Some of the cargo I've brought along is seafood. It won't do to let it spoil."

“Of course. I’m having inquiries made as we speak. Please wait just a moment.”

Raynesia bowed her head gracefully.

However, with a clearly scornful expression, Lord Malves interrupted her.

“Hah! What are you saying, Princess? A request regarding this matter has already been made in writing. The same documents were sent to Duke Sergiad in Maihama as well, and I have a response.”

“Pardon?”

“You are ready to receive it, aren’t you? The merchandise is top-quality, the sort delivered to the Holy Empire’s House of Saimiya. I don’t want to see goods such as these treated lightly. You do understand, I trust?”

CHAPTER.

LIBRA FESTIVAL



▶ NAME: AKATSUKI	
▶ AGE: 20	
▶ WEAPON: SINGLE-MINDEDNESS	
▶ SPECIAL SKILL: FLYING KNEE KICKS	
▶ BIRTHDAY: 7/7	
▶ FAVORITE FOOD: DORAYAKI	
▶ ITEM 1: [ILUAG KOFURIBOSHI] A PALE (ILUAG-COLORED) KOFURIBOSHI WITH A COOL PATTERN OF SCATTERED CHINESE BELLFLOWERS. AN ORIGINAL PRODUCT FROM NANO'S CLOTHING KIMACHI, WHICH MAKES IT'S HOME KIMACHI PRODUCTION GUILD MODERNIZED. KIMACHI CRAFTS ITS OWN TRADITION AS CLOTHING, SUCH AS BAGGIES AND PURSUES WHICH ARE SCARCE IN THE WORLD OF KIMACHI SALES.	
▶ ITEM 2: [CINNABAR ROUGE] A PALE PINK LIP ROUGE INSTEAD OF BEING IN STOCK FORM, IT'S THE OLD, FASHIONED PIPE YOU WANT ONLY WITH A FINGER. THERE ARE BRIGHTER COLORS AND SHINING, RESIDENT TYPES AS WELL, BUT THIS ONE IS ABOUT AS MUCH AS KIMACHI CAN MANAGE.	
▶ ITEM 3: [WIND DRAGON'S WIND CHIME] A FURNITURE ITEM CREATED BY THE ARTISAN GUILD. ANTIQUE, WIND DRAGON SCALES ARE USED AS THE CHIMES. KIMACHI LOVES THIS WIND CHIME AS A DOORBELL.	





<ICE AX>

A tool used in mining, and
one of the things that are
sort of like crowbars.

“None of that now. You mustn’t use force.”

“Line up, line up!”

“Yes, we’re accepting documents over here. Yes, yes!”

Cheerful voices flew back and forth.

The voices belonged to beautiful girls.

In *Elder Tales*, due to its nature as a game, whether they were player-controlled characters or the characters that came and went in town, all the women were fundamentally cute or beautiful. Men acquired the adjectives *distinguished*, *cool*, or *cute*.

As that was the case, if a certain number of women gathered together, particularly if they were Adventurers, they would probably all be lovely...but even then, the current level of gaiety was excessive.

Inside the countermeasure headquarters, which had been hastily set up near the entrance to the great exhibition and sale hall, Shiroe stealthily heaved a sigh.

This wasn’t the first time he’d seen girls giving their all for Soujirou’s sake. People said that falling in love made women beautiful, and it was true. Shiroe interpreted this to mean that their cheeks flushed, their eyes grew dewy, and they showed soft expressions more often, which made them seem more charming.

However, on top of this, Soujirou’s groupies—or, in their words, “personal bodyguard”—seemed to be scattering heart marks from head to toe. The aura made it into their voices, too, giving them a honeyed sweetness.

This is more than I expected.

With a sour expression, Shiroe looked around the venue.

Here and there around the great hall, girls with blue armbands were organizing lines, occasionally observing negotiations between People of the Earth merchants and Adventurers, and giving advice.

Their actions were smooth and skilled, and they suggested several hundred hours of solid training.

Of course, they hadn’t taken anywhere near that much time.

It was all due to the power of Soujirou's personal bodyguard, whom Shiroe had eloquently won over. You'd never think it just to look at them, but they were a highly organized group.

Not only that, but thanks to their telechat contact network, more people kept showing up.

As far as Shiroe knew, the West Wind Brigade—the combat guild of which Soujirou was guild master—had a current total of thirty members. However, no matter how you looked at it, there seemed to be over fifty girls participating in the current operation.

“Counselor Shiroe.”

A girl with a resolute expression addressed Shiroe.

Apparently, before he was aware of it, Shiroe had begun to be treated as “Counselor.” This was because Soujirou had told them to “Obey Mister Shiroe for on-site orders.”

“Five new members have arrived, and can be dispatched as a party.”

Her brisk report was smooth and seemed polished.

Even in major guilds like Silver Sword or Gundari, the softer members wouldn't be capable of this.

“Uh...”

Shiroe searched for words.

Even though he'd proposed this operation himself, he was well aware of how complicated and noncommittal his current expression was.

“Where's Soujirou?”

“Sir. Master Sou ♥ is currently in the hall on a date—I mean, he's patrolling, and Squad Four is in attendance.”

Shiroe looked out the window, gauging the time. It was probably about time to move on to the next stage.

“In that case, contact Soujirou. Tell him to return to the countermeasure headquarters, then join up with Squad Five. Keep conducting forty-five-minute hall patrols. Squad Four will take over Squad Five's current duties: In other words, directly guarding the headquarters and assisting with reception. Then, organize new arrivals into new squads of three members each. Put these on duty patrolling the city.”

“Understood, sir. We, we, we—”

“Eh?”

The girl had suddenly gone bright red. Shiroe cocked his head, perplexed.

“We of Squad Five will go on patrol with Master Sou, according to your orders, Counselor Shiroe, sir.”

As she repeated back the order, a few of the bodyguards who had been shooting furtive glances their way—in other words, the girls of

Squad Five—gave squeals that couldn't be completely hidden.

"Together with Master Sou!" "That's a first for me." "What'll I do? I'm not wearing cute undies!" Murmurs that were begging for all sorts of sarcastic retorts escaped the gaggle. Their eyes had sailed past dewy and were now nearly heart shaped.

Yet, their idea was pretty close to the mark.

The operation Shiroe had proposed this time used a guard patrol with Soujirou (or rather, a group date on that pretext) as bait to increase the number of staff on site.

Soujirou was slowly patrolling this exhibition and sale venue, which overflowed with autumn and winter clothes, with squads of three or four members. He had orders to be careful not to hurry, so the act really was a date. Soujirou had been instructed to buy each one a present that cost up to twenty coins. The Round Table Council would pick up the tab.

When he'd hit on the idea, along with the flash of inspiration—*This is brilliant!*—Shiroe had also cut himself down: *Come on, is a maneuver like this really going to work?* However, the result was that it was functioning in the hall at this very moment, producing an effect beyond anything he'd imagined.

Shiroe didn't know the details, but he'd heard that Soujirou's personal bodyguard boasted an iron unity. (The girl who'd spoken to him a moment ago had bragged about it.) Apparently there was a pyramid-shaped command system that ran from Master Sou's chief manager down to the newbies. They'd used that command system to organically organize formations, and now they were single-handedly dealing with the trouble in the hall.

Although Soujirou and his group were wandering around slowly, there were six other squads on patrol, stopping trouble before it started. If it looked as though a troublesome argument was about to break out, Shiroe had ordered them to contact him by telechat without hesitation, or to threaten the merchants with the idea of continuing their discussion in the presence of the Round Table Council.

At first, he'd been wary, thinking that the People of the Earth merchants or spies might expand the uproar anyway, but possibly because even People of the Earth had difficulty coping with attractive young girls, almost no trouble was occurring.

After all, the girls' motivation was tremendous.

They were conducting systematic, careful patrols, and their expressions were literally transfigured. At the same time, they dealt with the venue in a genuine, mild way that left no room for complaint. If they participated in this volunteer activity, they might

get closer to Soujirou. This fantasy probably never left their minds. As they diligently patrolled, Soujirou appeared before them again and again. Not only that, but he was patrolling at the head of a different squad every time. Of course their will to work grew stronger.

If they thought Soujirou might be watching, they dealt with matters more courteously. They were intent on acting like adorable girls, and their pretense of feline innocence went so overboard that, to Shiroe, they seemed to have the aura of ferocious tigers.

Of course, compared to the girls—whose adrenaline had spiked along with their motivation—Shiroe's biorhythm was as low as it could possibly get. It wasn't that he was jealous of Soujirou, or that he wanted to build a harem, but having a disparity of this magnitude shoved right in his face made him feel—like every other guy in the world—rather hopeless.

It was true that Soujirou was an agreeable young man. He was mild and kind, a gentleman, and a nice guy who could always be counted on in a fight. On top of that, the way he was hopelessly scatterbrained and clumsy stirred their protective instincts—or that was how he had come to understand it from what the girls said. When he was in the Debauchery Tea Party, Nazuna and Yomi had explained to him in exhaustive detail just what it was about Soujirou that was so charming.

However, even then, he wasn't fully satisfied.

Was it possible to be this popular, just from those things?

He was so hugely popular it made Shiroe wonder whether it was some kind of magic. He wasn't jealous, and yet he was exasperated. *It's truly weird*, Shiroe muttered to himself.

“Lord Counselor, it's a pleasure to meet you. We've just arrived at our post. We're, ergh, umm, Number Sixteen? That's right, Squad Sixteen!”

As he looked at the elated girl who stood stiffly at attention in front of him, Shiroe reconfirmed the weirdness he'd felt up until a moment ago.

What makes girls like this? Love is seriously strange. I guess popular people really are a type of genius. ...Although they're right next door to dangerous objects.

He thought of Soujirou.

He was a good-looking boy who was a bit on the delicate side, yet absolutely loved combat. He was a perfectly satisfactory guy to have as a friend. They were gaming buddies, and he thought it was fine to just leave it at that, but maybe it was different from a girl's perspective.

“Understood. Squads Nine through Eighteen, go out and act as town guards.”

“Town guards? You mean like the Shinsengumi!”

For some reason, the girl was very excited and happy. Shiroe nodded absently. He understood that when dealing with women this hyper, you didn’t make unnecessary retorts, and you didn’t defy them.

“Um, oh. My liege.”

Akatsuki spoke. She and Shiroe were watching the Crescent Moon League booth by turns. Her embarrassed expression was probably due to the clothes she was wearing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um... Are you leaving? What about that promise? The stage...”

At Akatsuki’s words, Shiroe remembered. *Come to think of it...*

Part of the promise they’d made to Henrietta had been a stage show to promote sales. No doubt Shiroe was more of a stagehand, but she was probably counting on Akatsuki fully. It was likely that the clothes Henrietta had put on her, an outfit in the style of the old world, were meant to be worn in the stage show.

However, at present, Akiba was under attack.

Technically, it was no time for stage shows.

“You did promise, didn’t you, my liege...?”

“Well, yes, but...”

No... That might not be the case...

Pushing up his glasses, Shiroe considered.

If the enemy’s goal was a saturation attack on the Round Table Council’s processing abilities, and if they were working to damage trust and probably to cause internal schisms, then, to the greatest extent possible, the Libra Festival should go on as planned. That was what Shiroe had thought, but now he adjusted that course of action slightly.

In the first place, people from outside won’t know what the plans were. If it ends up looking like a success, there won’t be any problem with ad-libbing a bit.

Thinking that way vastly increased the amount of freedom Shiroe had.

He held his breath and moved mental pawns over the timetable in his mind. His own plans, the plans of other players. He strictly separated the information he had from the information he hadn’t confirmed yet, filling in board surfaces one by one.

Shiroe wasn’t God, and so of course there were lots of situations he wasn’t seeing. However, by nature, with each move they made, players disclosed a surprising amount of information. ...Just as the enemy’s arrogant methods had exposed their own carelessness.

Humans were creatures who couldn’t do a thing without leaving footprints.

When that additional information was added in, the game boards he couldn't see began to dimly materialize.

The efforts of each resident. Their reliability on-site. Against a background of festival atmosphere, various forces' intentions regarding the town of Akiba writhed.

Shiroe thought that the world was filled with players on his level, and to him, it was a form of pondering. There were countless situations he couldn't handle.

He'd contacted Krusty and Isaac and was having them quell all the incidents involving violence in Akiba. On top of this, he was moving every last movable pawn. Because he was following a policy of not making the incident public, the system at every location was a bit like a volunteer effort, but the main forces of Akiba's famous guilds were involved in the affair. Strong players were gathered on this game board.

In fact, right now, he was unable to handle the enemy on his own and was borrowing Soujirou's abilities. His personal bodyguard was on the frontline of negotiation issues with People of the Earth merchants, solving problems with enough force to literally drive them away. These were abilities Shiroe didn't have.

And again, he remembered the voice of his little companion who had contacted him from the Production Guild Liaison Committee.

Shiroe could sense her fingertips: still young, but filled with intent. Although it was still small and faint, he saw a vision of a move like a newly hatched chick flapping its wings.

Calasin's processing speed had risen, and the backlog of trouble was clearly dwindling. This acted as covering fire for the patrol squads led by Isaac and the others, and the slight leeway they created was being pried open by force through the power of Soujirou's personal bodyguard.

They were pushing their disadvantage back further than he'd expected.

Although it hadn't yet taken shape, he'd begun to be able to visualize how the situation would be settled. At this point, Shiroe could pay out the next countermeasure.

Shiroe turned his thoughts toward the freedom Akatsuki's words had shown him. Doing something that hadn't been planned, yet would not destroy the Libra Festival's timetable, and adding excitement to the festival. That sort of move.

After all, the enemy had used these methods—adding stress and sowing wild rumors—because they were ultimately plotting to weaken Akiba's unity. Their goal was to make people think, *Akiba's nothing big*. It was an attack aimed at weakening spirits, quite apart from the

actual state of things. The most effective way to counterstrike was to rev up the Libra Festival and maximize the participants' satisfaction.

"—My liege?"

At Akatsuki's worried voice, Shiroe looked up and smiled back at her. It was, in Henrietta's words, his black-hearted smile.

"Ah. Akatsuki? Have Henrietta get outfits ready. Contact the nearby guilds, too, and have them pull together head-to-toe coordinates somehow or other. The nosebleed-provoking kind."

"Huh?"

"Squads Nine through Eighteen!"

"Yes?!"

At the prompt response that returned to him, Shiroe stood up and spoke, his expression fearless.

"Go out and patrol the town! I know I'm causing you trouble, but please help me out. After today's duties are over, I'll treat you to a delicious meal. I want you to show Soujirou just how lovely you can be!"

► 2

At Lord Malves's words, Raynesia went pale.

It wasn't that she understood. She hadn't gotten that far yet.

Raynesia had picked up the scorched scent of danger.

"Come. You will hurry and make the preparations, won't you, Princess?"

"Huh? Oh... I, um..."

Raynesia turned, as if looking for help. Her eyes found Elissa; she was roundly rebuking a subordinate maid and looking through some copied files she'd received from Lord Malves's men.

"Princess."

"Well?"

"The documents are real. ...It's hard to imagine, but all I can think is that they must have slipped through the cracks due to an oversight on our part."

An oversight.

Slipped through the cracks.

Even when she heard those words, Raynesia's brain didn't respond right away. Then, slowly, the mistake sank into her consciousness. It felt like an icy cold liquid.

In other words, it probably meant that when Lord Malves had

planned to make for Akiba in a transport ship, he had sounded out Raynesia about borrowing a storehouse in advance. He'd sent the same documents to Maihama as well, and had received a response approving them.

In other words, it meant that Raynesia herself had committed to preparing a storehouse. Apparently the long and short of it was that while she was preparing for the festival, she'd forgotten.

Of course, she didn't know what had actually happened. The message might not have reached her due to some accident in transmission, or the office maid might have forgotten about it, or Raynesia herself might have been so very busy that she'd mislaid the documents somewhere...

However, there was no time to question anyone about it now.

Lord Malves had a response from Raynesia's side. At this point, it could be nothing other than Raynesia's mistake.

In the first place, Raynesia was the hostess, and she had a duty to accommodate her guests. In addition, the daughter of the House of Cowen, who was posing as a freeloader in the town of Akiba, and Lord Malves, the marine transport noble of the West, were very different in terms of personal rank. Then, considering the tense relationship between the East and the West, her only option was to humble herself.

Raynesia was a woman.

In accordance with the customs of the People of the Earth, she hadn't received any political training, but even so, there were things one picked up simply by being in fashionable society.

"Hmph! What's the matter? You aren't about to tell me preparations haven't been made, are you? Not after I applied so carefully beforehand."

"I, um..."

It would be easy to apologize.

However, Raynesia wasn't used to negotiations of this sort, and she couldn't decide whether it would be all right to humble herself in this situation or not. *If this is how things are going to go, I should have learned more.* ...This was something she was too lazy to think, but even so, she thought she ought to have taken steps of some sort.

Naturally, she should have done something along the lines of having Maihama send over a few distinguished civil servants for her to keep close by. Of course she'd chosen attendants within the range her grandfather had allowed, but even then, it hadn't been enough.

"Is this Cowen etiquette?... Or was the story that you'd formed a relationship of cooperation with the Adventurers, and the town of Akiba, a false one?"

At his mocking voice, Raynesia hung her head.

She was bursting with retorts she wanted to make, but she didn't know which would be right and which would be dangerous.

At any rate, she had to apologize, compensate him for the ship's cargo and settle things peacefully. Setting aside the detailed procedures to think about bit by bit, would it be possible to postpone this problem for the moment, at least until after the banquet? This was what Raynesia thought with her numbed mind.

She'd always been called a beautiful princess.

No matter what party she appeared at, she'd been surrounded by praise from knights and civil servants.

In the midst of those frozen days, she thought she'd acted well, but she felt her temperature falling. Raynesia couldn't understand it. Why were her emotions this unstable? Why was she so out of sorts?

This frustration wasn't Raynesia's. After all, Raynesia didn't really care about a thing like this. The displeasure and frustration and self-reproach must be the fault of this thoughtless town—

“Good evening!”

Raynesia had frozen, her gaze lowered to the magnificent carpet. When its colors abruptly fell into shadow, she realized there was someone standing in front of her, and her eyes came up as if she'd been stung. The back she saw was covered by unfamiliar clothes.

Over a shirt made out of a soft-looking cloth, a type the People of the Earth didn't know, the figure wore a long, hooded vest. It was a young man, the culprit who, on the date of that fateful speech that had started them toward Zantleaf, had pushed Raynesia off a metaphorical cliff, making it impossible for her to turn back. Shiroe.

“Master...Shiroe?”

“And who is this?”

“Pardon me. I'm Shiroe; I lead Log Horizon, one of the eleven guilds on the Round Table Council.”

“Shiroe... No family name, then? Oho...”

“That's right. I'm an Adventurer, you see.”

Before Raynesia's eyes, even when confronted with this great aristocrat from the West, the young man in town clothes didn't let his carefree attitude flicker. Raynesia was at a loss for words, but even so, she took half a step forward. There was no telling what sort of trouble an Adventurer who wasn't familiar with the courtesy and customs of the People of the Earth might call down upon them. She'd resolved to become Akiba's shield in order to prevent this from happening.

However, there was a hand on Raynesia's shoulder, restraining her with a strength that was gentle but absolute. It was a large, sinewy, masculine hand, and it belonged to Krusty: Krusty had checked her from behind. Raynesia looked up at him over her

shoulder. Without lowering his gaze, he spoke to her.

“There’s no need to worry.”

His glasses got in the way and she couldn’t read his expression, but there was a very cruel smile on his lips.

“Welcome to Akiba, Lord Malves. We’ve heard many rumors of the success of your spirit ship, which uses spirits in its engine, and of your skill in marine transport.”

Shiroe smiled as he spoke, and at his words, Malves’s eyes widened very slightly. However, he only said, “Why, thank you,” and the set of his lips remained ironic. In terms of People of the Earth etiquette, his attitude bordered on scorn.

He was clearly ridiculing Shiroe and—viewed in combination with the fact that Shiroe had introduced himself as a member of the Round Table Council—Akiba’s Round Table Council as well. His attitude irritated Raynesia so much that she felt her cheeks grow hot.

However, Shiroe didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. It was possible that he knew nothing about People of the Earth etiquette in the first place.

“Well, was there something? Miss Elissa? Where are you?”

“Here, Mister Shiroe. ...These are the particulars.”

However, Shiroe’s words threw cold water on that irritation.

Raynesia, her expression flabbergasted, found herself watching her own lady-in-waiting show Shiroe the letters from a moment before. She hadn’t been aware that the two were acquainted. Elissa wore a sour expression, but even so, she seemed to have a kind of respect for the young man called Shiroe.

“Oh. Hm. ...I see, yes, that would have been possible, too. I understand the gist. ...Hey, Michitaka!”

Without even bothering to set up a telechat, Shiroe called to a big man in the hall. At his voice, Michitaka—the guild master of the Marine Organization, a man who was built like a bear—ambled over to them. Shiroe interrupted the man’s greeting and began to discuss the issue without preamble.

“Clumsy, you know. Clumsy, or sloppy, or a complete lack of style... Michitaka, Princess Raynesia has messed up, and apparently it’s caused trouble.”

“Oho. Well, well. Isn’t that something.”

Raynesia thought that, rather than being ill-mannered, Shiroe seemed to have a personality that was abnormally impetuous, or maybe utilitarian. Her first impression of him hadn’t changed: Raynesia wasn’t good with this young man. She wasn’t good with Krusty, either, but her discomfort with Krusty stemmed from the fact that she couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

Her sense of being unable to deal with Shiroe came from the feeling that if he decided to do something, he'd probably do it, no matter how reckless, and he wouldn't listen to a word she said. Krusty was simply impossible to understand, and that made him scary, but Shiroe was a hunter who wouldn't hesitate to use Raynesia as bait.

"And who are you, exactly? I'm currently inquiring about the error Miss Raynesia has made."

At Lord Malves's words, the corners of Shiroe's lips curved up. He explained the situation so that the newcomer would understand as well.

"This big man is Michitaka, leader of the Marine Organization, one of the eleven guilds on the Round Table Council. Now, Lord Malves has come by sea and brought cargo with him, and he needs a storehouse. A letter asking Raynesia to have one ready arrived, but she either forgot it or lost it. Well, either way, she bungled it, and that's how things stand."

At Shiroe's words, Lord Malves nodded, looking triumphant.

"That's right. The cargo includes foodstuffs and precious spices. If left in the hot, damp hold, they're sure to rot within a few days."

On hearing this, Raynesia wanted to raise her voice in protest.

It was a false accusation, something she had no memory of. ... Well, it was, but it was also true that bringing that into question now wouldn't do any good.

"You must have been planning to do some very big business."

"I was attending in person. It's only natural that I would use the most elegant ship in my trading firm as transport, Shiroe or whatever your name was."

Shiroe's attitude had probably pleased him: The middle-aged noble, who smelled of powder, gave a purring, bestial laugh.

"The new Spirit Ship *Aegir*, just commissioned last month. I only know of it through rumors, but I hear it's a beautiful, swanlike vessel."

"Oho. Such rumors have already reached Akiba as well? Well, that's correct... And due to Miss Raynesia's negligence, all the cargo on that ship will be lost. Don't you think that's a cruel betrayal, Adventurers?"

"That's very unfortunate."

Why is Shiroe just agreeing with what the lord says...? Does he think the People of the Earth don't matter, because he's an Adventurer...? But this incident is already reflecting on the dignity of Akiba!

"Well. I came because I have business with Princess Raynesia. Akatsuki, Miss Henrietta."

"Huh?"

She'd been distracted by Shiroe and hadn't noticed, but a capable-

looking woman with glasses and the small, black-haired girl who'd given her such a horrible time during that speech had quietly appeared.

"The princess says she'll work with us to make this festival a success. Help her dress."

"Huh? Huh?"

Raynesia didn't understand. She looked to her right, at Elissa.

Elissa shook her head and gave a small sigh.

Giving up on her unreliable friend, Raynesia looked back over her left shoulder at Krusty, but he only shrugged his shoulders.

While this was going on, the serious black-haired girl and the smiling woman with glasses had apprehended Raynesia. Although their attitude was polite, their atmosphere brooked no argument, and even though they were in public, their hands reached for Raynesia's clothes.

"Wha...?! What are you doing?! Huh? Change clothes... I can't possibly do that in a place like... I-I mean, I'm in the middle of a serious discussion with Lord Malves! It's important, in order to protect Akiba— Master Krusty! Say something to them, please! You are my knight, aren't you?!"

"Wasn't that only for the duration of the lords' council?"

"Are knights' vows so inconstant?! Do you mean to make me—*me!*—believe you spoke in jest?!"

More than half panicking, Raynesia begged Krusty in tears. She'd seen the quiet, dark smile this bespectacled, alabaster knight wore, but Krusty was the only one here she could look to for help.

"We'll extend the contract, then."

"D-do something about this. I-I'll change! I'll do it later, properly, so for now, please explain to Lord Malves—!"

"Shiroe. ...My princess has been granted an extension, and you heard her."

Before they knew it, the fuss created by the smiling Henrietta and the too-serious Akatsuki, who had secured Princess Raynesia's arms from either side, had become the focus of attention in the hall. In the center of the crowd that had formed around them, Krusty prompted Shiroe to continue.

"Understood, Krusty... Everything is ready."

"Lord Malves. We understand what you're saying. However, those letters have already reached Akiba's Round Table Council."

Krusty, whose expression was hidden behind his glasses, spoke

briefly. His voice wasn't at all loud, but his unique timing left a strong impression on everyone there. Malves was caught off guard; for a moment, his expression looked foolish, but as if he'd collected himself almost immediately, he raised his voice.

"Wha...?! The Round Table Council, contacted?! That can't be! ... It's a *storehouse*! You can't possibly get one ready so easily. You don't understand. I didn't come here in a cart! Weren't you listening?!"

"The New Spirit Ship *Aegir*, wasn't it? It has a carrying capacity of five hundred tons, if I recall. It's equipped with an ice room as well. Truly an elite vessel."

"That's right, Adventurer. What storehouse is there that can house that much material, under controlled temperatures? You could never prepare one right away; you're babbling nonsense."

Malves blustered with an attitude that was the picture of arrogance. His hubris showed in the way he kept clicking his tongue in irritation, over and over.

Raynesia was assailed by a cold shudder.

Not at Malves's arrogance.

It was at his lack of fear. As a People of the Earth noble, Malves was too accustomed to having others obey him. The nobles of Eastal had had that sort of arrogance as well, but that authority carried absolutely no weight with the Adventurers. If Malves took an attitude this inflammatory, there was a significant possibility that he would be cut down.

Nobles had great power in People of the Earth society, but their bodies weren't indestructible. If an Adventurer attacked him, he'd be charcoal in less than a tenth of a second.

It wasn't that she sympathized with Malves, but if that happened, it might very well start a war. The Adventurers' righteous anger could bring their own destruction down upon them...

Oh. Oooh... Why do I have to worry about this white pig?!

"Huhn? The Round Table Council was contacted? Well then, that's fine. However, I heard that the storehouses you Adventurers loan out are filled with traveling merchants' cargo. Do you mean to tell me you received word, and yet I'm met with this miserable state of affairs?"

"I'm terribly sorry. This incident was all my, Raynesia's—"

Malves had shifted his target to the Adventurers and the Round Table Council, and at his persistent tone, Raynesia finally shrieked, but...

"Michitaka. This is the letter."

At the sight of the letter Shiroe had produced as if by magic, everyone froze. She'd only caught a glimpse of it, but it looked exactly

like the copy Malves had been waving around a moment before.

She couldn't say for certain, but a message Raynesia hadn't possessed had reached Akiba's Round Table Council.

Taking it, Michitaka scanned the contents, then nodded magnanimously.

"...Want us to arrange for trucks to carry the cargo, too?"

On top of this affirmation of his intentions—which seemed as if it could only be a rash promise—Michitaka gave a broad, macho grin and shrugged his shoulders.

"You can't mean...!"

"Sure, we've got a storehouse. ...Five hundred tons, you said? That's not so much. The Marine Organization's private storehouse has several times the floor area of the Round Table Council's public ones. Even if it was five hundred or five thousand, it wouldn't matter. Did you think the traveling merchants had busted us? Or, moreover, that we Adventurers wouldn't save our People of the Earth princess?"

At Michitaka's words, Raynesia clenched her fists.

Was this Adventurer trying to salvage her mistake? Michitaka was an uncompromising man who'd spoken loudly and eloquently about the pride of the Adventurers before the assembled People of the Earth nobles at the Lords' Council at the Ancient Court of Eternal Ice. Raynesia had never dreamed this man would make such an unselfish offer.

No, not to me...

Raynesia stole a glance at the young man who had his hands on her shoulders. Possibly because he was so close, she couldn't see his expression without looking up, and even if she had seen it, it probably wouldn't have been at all clear. It felt as if he was smiling thinly and also as if he was morose. Although it was impossible to tell what this menace was thinking, she understood that he'd requested that favor from Michitaka.

"Master Krusty..."

"To think our security was too perfect. Since we managed to shut down all physical trouble, we were late in catching on here."

Raynesia couldn't grasp the full meaning of Krusty's murmur.

"...Master Krusty? I'm..."

"Because you're a valuable shield...I mean, princess."

Krusty didn't lower his gaze. Reluctantly, Raynesia thanked him. The number of debts she owed him just kept increasing. The snowballing sense of indebtedness made her conscience and her pride scream and throb feverishly. However, in response to her words of gratitude, Krusty only said, incomprehensibly, "Shiroe's the one you should thank."

Meanwhile, Malves's expression had grown grim.

Clicking his tongue in irritation, he shot a look at Shiroe. Shiroe only turned Malves's glance aside with an innocent expression.

Looking very angry, the great noble of Westlande sharply bade them farewell and left the hall.

Raynesia felt the strength draining from her legs. Malves had gone. His pride might have been wounded, but for now, his life was safe. They'd avoided any decisive split with Malves, and by extension, with the West.

Her relief at the unexpected result was so great it was as though her spine had turned to foam.

"That's right. We've settled things here. Take care of the rest."

"Very well, Master Shiroe."

"Understood, my liege."

As if taking advantage of that mental vulnerability, they dragged Raynesia away. By the time Raynesia realized that her own knight, with whom she'd extended her contract, had given a little wave and merely watched her go, she'd already been stripped down to her underwear.

► 3

Raynesia's dinner party had disintegrated.

But even as it fell apart, it was a great success.

The front doors of the official Maihama residence that served as the embassy were thrown open wide, and all the guests spilled out into Akiba's central plaza, simultaneously mixing with the people who had been enjoying the evening festival there. The feast that had been prepared was carried out onto the plaza, dish after dish, and served.

Of course, that alone wasn't enough for the people flooding the plaza, and all the restaurants that faced the plaza had their kitchens running at full rotation. Thanks to the proclamation that Shiroe had quietly issued—a promise to the effect that everything people ate and drank tonight would be paid for by the Round Table Council—people were provided with so much food and drink that the stores were nearly exhausted.

As a result, the average level of the food came down from what Raynesia had intended. Rather than a buffet-style dinner party, it was more like what would be found at an outdoor celebration or a flower-viewing party. However, the Adventurers didn't seem to think that was the least bit important.

When Krusty ushered Raynesia into the plaza and they saw her, a stir ran through the Adventurers. Since that rousing speech, Princess Raynesia had appeared at several gatherings in Akiba, but this was very nearly the first time she'd made a direct appearance before ordinary Adventurers.

The princess entrusted her slender fingers to the knight, and her eyes were slightly downcast. Her smile, cheeks flushed with embarrassment, was just like a lovely flower, and it cast a spell on most of the Adventurers. She looked fresh and innocent, a beautiful girl straight out of a dream.

What startled them was her clothing.

Raynesia was wearing a denim mermaid skirt. Over an autumnal chartreuse shirt, she wore a short bolero-style jacket. The long skirt was graceful, but it was a casual fashion. A black ribbon was woven into her long silver hair, which hung down her back.

Raynesia had only ever shown the gothic dresses that marked her as People of the Earth nobility. No one in Akiba had expected her to appear in clothes like these.

Commotion enveloped the plaza. To the Adventurers, the outfit looked like neat and tidy date fashion of the sort they'd seen back on Earth; to the People of the Earth, it was a modern Adventurer look that exuded a sense of the new era.

Raynesia advanced along the south side of the plaza, led by a morose Krusty, then seated herself on the cushion of a large bench that had been hastily put together. The big bench was an item created from the woodworking menu; the temporary arbor had been prepared at Shiroe's request, and it had been ready in less than fifteen minutes.

The sun had already set, and the plaza was illuminated by many torches, but the area around Raynesia was lit by Lumieres—possibly called there by a tactful Summoner—and was twice as full of light as anywhere else.

Black Sword Isaac slid his trademark sword from its sheath, saying that, due to reasons of security, the princess could not leave this bench, but that she wanted to share the night of the festival with them here in the plaza, and that, if they were so inclined, anyone who wanted to could greet her at this arbor. The commotion in the plaza grew even louder.

The surprise was probably greater for the People of the Earth than it was for the Adventurers. Many of them, particularly the ones who hadn't taken part in the plot, were peddlers from the towns and villages near Akiba. These people, who loaded cargo onto the backs of single horses or drew rattletrap carts, carrying their cargo from village to village, never got the chance to see a noble princess in person. And

this wasn't just a glimpse from afar: She would be greeting them. Their surprise was enormous.

Of course, that didn't mean a large number of people strode right up to greet her. A third of the people in the plaza were People of the Earth commoners, and the rest were diffident Japanese Adventurers.

Although everyone was enjoying the festival, even when a stylish group of people Raynesia had summoned from Maihama began to play an old serenade that had been handed down in Yamato, they all seemed to be holding back.

The one who first approached and got the ball rolling was, as expected, Michitaka.

Trailing about ten of his guild members, he visited the stylish bench and its surrounding arbor, which was made of folding screens and umbrellas and similar objects. On seeing them exchange friendly greetings with Raynesia, who seemed relieved, other guilds gradually began to move.

There were many Adventurers who asked for a greeting, and Elissa's subordinate maids hastily sprang into action.

Shiroe, who was looking down on the scene from a ruined elevated walkway that overlooked the plaza, poured fruit juice tea from a small nearby pot into a glass. In the amicable scene below him, Princess Raynesia was talking with Adventurers or with People of the Earth, and many of those were chatting with each other. It spoke more eloquently than anything else of the Libra Festival's success.

The idea of having Raynesia, a People of the Earth noble, appear in the plaza wearing a costume created by Adventurers in the style of the old world sent a powerful message to everyone participating in the festival.

The message was one of peace and amity. That unity would probably become a defense against attacks like this one.

This time, Shiroe thought, they seemed to have managed to get through the attack on Akiba.

The attack's point of origin had probably been the Westland aristocrat Malves, who'd retreated at Raynesia's dinner party.

Although, if he's that illogical, I doubt he was the mastermind.

Shiroe sensed that, at most, he'd been no more than the starting point of one of the major lines of attack.

As such, he wasn't sure this had ended the onslaught. As a matter of fact, the festival's security level was still raised, and the peacekeeping squads led by Isaac and Krusty were managing disputes that looked as though they might turn violent, with a focus on traffic entering and leaving the town.

This was true of the squads of girls that followed Soujirou, too.

They were still on patrol, watching out for disputes regarding business transactions and quarrels with roots in romance.

Shiroe had been appointed counselor, and regular check-ins and telechats asking for instructions on incident resolution methods were coming intermittently.

One of the reasons he'd stationed himself up here—where he could look out over the plaza—was so that he'd be ready to move at any time.

However, Shiroe wasn't that worried.

The attacks on processing speed and trust in the Round Table Council had all been attacks intended to disturb. The tactic of disturbance was effective, because it operated through surprise attacks and while the other party wasn't aware of it; now that the Round Table Council had taken steps to deal with it, they couldn't hope for much of an effect.

Of course, there were worse scenarios, but there was no point in exploring those now. Some fights were fought passively, without making all the moves you could see. Staying on guard and getting through the festival period was probably the best of their available options.

Even if we don't explore further, I think they'll probably attack us anyway. As Shiroe sighed, below him, the motion of the plaza continued. The crowds around the restaurants and Princess Raynesia were unchanged, but new music and a new crowd had appeared. Soujirou's personal bodyguard stood in two long lines, one on either side of the stone-flagged street that led from the guild center, and the space between them was wide and empty.

The first person to appear in that space was Marielle.

Waves of green hair and an innocent smile that made it seem as if light was streaming in. Her large, attractively swaying bosom was squeezed into a jacket with a crisp, clean design, and she walked with a spring in her step.

It might have disqualified her as a fashion model, but it was very much like her to wave in all four directions with both hands when she reached the end of the corridor that served as a stage.

Good grief, Mari... She really doesn't let anything get her down.

The gesture made Shiroe feel as if he might be getting a headache, or possibly as if he'd been encouraged. The next to appear was Henrietta, and then Akatsuki.

Ordinarily, Henrietta dressed like a secretary, as though it was a uniform she'd been issued; and Akatsuki, similarly, dressed in black from head to toe like a ninja. However, just for today, they'd changed their looks for the cause. The two of them wore the slightly ethnic-style casual tunics and wrap skirts the Crescent Moon League was

selling. The costumes were arranged differently, and in them, the pair looked like sisters.

The difference in their heights made them look like sisters who were drastically different in age, but he'd keep that to himself. Shiroe made this decision, laughing a little, as he saw Henrietta pick Akatsuki up and nuzzle her in an excess of excitement, even as she nailed a splendid turn.

Nearly unconscious of the spectators' gazes—which might have made it a blessing for Akatsuki—the two joked around with each other, but when they reunited with Marielle, they headed into the plaza. Parting the astonished crowd, they approached Raynesia, caught her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. That self-assured attitude was just like Marielle.

Akatsuki came up behind Raynesia and whispered something to her. From the way Raynesia went pale, she'd probably threatened her again. Marielle took Raynesia right out into the square, then began to spin around, pulling in Henrietta and Akatsuki as well.

A show like this would be seen by far more people out here than it would have if they'd held it in the hall. Light cast down by Firebirds resting their wings on guild buildings' roofs illuminated attendees' profiles, and the repeated bursts of applause were like ocean surf, approaching and receding.

The lively music was a nostalgic pop song from the old world. The slightly old-fashioned melody was recreated on medieval instruments.

Raynesia was bewildered and kept looking around, flustered, but at times like that, beautiful girls had it good. Even in the sort of fashion you'd see in a town on Earth—something she probably wasn't used to wearing—all she had to do was smile apologetically and it couldn't have suited her better.

“...Shiroe...”

“Good work, Minori.”



At the voice which hesitantly addressed him, Shiroe lifted his gaze from the plaza. Minori was coming toward him across the elevated walkway from the guild center. She wore a complicated expression that was proud and happy, yet hesitant and shy.

Shiroe didn't know what this small companion of his was thinking, but he knew what sort of role she'd played during the daylong uproar. She'd stayed by Calasin's side, carrying out the duties of the headquarters that had supported the handling of the entire affair. The responsibility had been as heavy as managing a full raid.

"Have a seat."

"Huh? But..."

As Minori hung back, Shiroe indicated a spot next to himself on the wooden bench. For some reason, Minori looked as if she felt very small and embarrassed. Shiroe polished another glass he'd taken out of his bag for her and filled it with the same fruit tea he was drinking.

"...Um..."

"Thank you. And well done."

"Y-yessir."

Minori's voice cracked, and her spine was stretched very straight; it was funny, and Shiroe laughed a little. Did Minori understand what the work she'd done had been worth?

Timidly, holding the glass in both hands, Minori took a tiny sip. Below their feet, illuminated by torches, Bug Light Lamps, and summoned magical creatures, the lively festival spread as far as they could see.

At the very least, Minori's hands had protected a fraction of that liveliness.

Small hands, thought Shiroe.

Still, the tiny hands of this middle school girl were the hands of a fighter. They were hands that held the resolve to protect their post to the death.

When Minori had told him she was helping with the work at the Liaison Committee, he'd thought it was unexpected, but at the same time, it had made sense to him somehow. He'd spent time with Minori, and had sensed the irrepressible positivity within this little girl.

Her twin brother had the same dynamic energy, but while Touya had promptly chosen the path of combat and martial arts, Minori seemed to have hesitated over her choice. However, the undirected will inside Minori hadn't been able to stay that way forever.

In the place she herself had chosen, Minori had pulled off an extraordinary feat Shiroe had never even hoped for.

She's far more level-headed than I am...

Inwardly, Shiroe gave a self-deprecating sigh. Every memory he had of his own days as a middle schooler made him want to cover his eyes.

There was his past self, and however he looked, he couldn't find the sort of strength Minori had, the sort that was open to the outside. He remembered having been a typical, overly self-conscious, wince-worthy middle schooler. Back then, Shiroe had thought himself cool because he was different from other people; he hadn't realized that the part of him that was different was actually exactly like those other people.

Just remembering it was embarrassing.

"Um, Shiroe..."

"Hm?"

"Aren't you going to go greet her? I mean, aren't we the only guild on the Round Table Council that hasn't gone to greet the princess?"

Shiroe shrugged his shoulders vaguely.

"I saw her a little bit ago."

Those words hung in the air for a long time, but soon a cheer welled up from below their feet, drowning them out. Had some guild revealed an avant-garde outfit? Shiroe listened to the reports that came in by telechat, occasionally giving brief responses. After a rather long interval, Minori asked a new question.

"It's on purpose...isn't it?"

"Yes."

"...I'm sorry, Shiroe."

Minori bowed her head, shamefacedly.

"It's nothing to apologize for. It isn't anything to make public, either."

"But I...I meddled, and I was trying to take you to the dinner party... Even though there wasn't any need to, now that I think about it. You're one of the eleven guilds; there's no way they wouldn't have sent you an invitation. In other words...you were planning to make Princess Raynesia dislike you, right from the start, weren't you."

It wasn't even a question at this point. She was confirming it.

She's a terribly sharp kid.

That said, it hadn't been such a difficult plan to see through in the first place. There were many others on the Round Table Council who'd caught on. In addition, the maneuver couldn't work without companions who saw through it to a certain extent.

"Krusty's on better terms with the princess. In order to get discussions moving, it's convenient to have someone who's liked and someone who isn't. That true in terms of the future as well."

“.....”

“The princess’s position is shaky. Right now, she has everyone’s sympathy because of her beauty, her straightforward temperament, and her hardworking sincerity, but that won’t last forever. The princess currently likes Akiba, but we don’t know how long that will last, either. Of course, the relationship between the People of the Earth and the Adventurers has shown great improvement. Still, we don’t know how long things will stay that way. There may be all sorts of situations where coercive maneuvers are necessary. Without a doubt, a time will come that makes this incident look like nothing at all. For the sake of that time as well, we need to assign roles.”

Of course, the strategy depended on Krusty supporting the princess’s feelings. When he’d realized this, Krusty had looked cross, but there hadn’t been any help for it: That was his role. He was, at the very least, the Adventurer who represented the Round Table Council, and it would be a problem if he didn’t shoulder burdens of that size.

In any case, from what Shiroe had seen, being forced to go along with Shiroe’s plan had been the part Krusty hadn’t liked. Even if he’d been left to his own devices, Shiroe figured that Krusty would have helped the princess regardless.

Besides—

Following his flowing thoughts, Shiroe strained his eyes to see the threshold of his vision of what would be. In the midst of a mass of indistinct predictions, he could see a pale future.

That princess with the troublesome personality needed Krusty.

Krusty also needed the princess—or so he wanted to believe.

“You don’t mind that...Shiroe?”

“Why?”

Part of his mind caught Minori’s words, and Shiroe’s thoughts were cut short. Shiroe’s companion wore an expression that seemed troubled, and distressed, and sad.

“Because...”

Minori faltered. He waited for the rest of her explanation, but the words didn’t come.

“The disadvantage to Log Horizon, you mean? ...Regarding that, at a certain stage, I’m thinking of asking Captain Nyanta to act as the leader and go to greet Princess Raynesia separately. At an appropriate dinner party or something, you know. Of course, you’ll be going as well, Minori, so you should probably dress up. That sky-blue outfit the other day was cute.”

At Shiroe’s words, Minori’s anguish seemed to deepen.

Shiroe scratched his head, wondering if he’d given the wrong answer. Apparently she hadn’t liked what he’d said, or he’d directed it

the wrong way.

“Isn’t that painful for *you*, Shiroe?”

“.....”

Oh, Shiroe thought. *I guess it might look that way, too.* That was something he hadn’t factored in. It was such an ordinary sentiment that he hadn’t even thought of it.

“No, not at all. It’s normal.”

“.....”

Minori seemed to have a very hard time accepting this idea.

Even though it was no more than necessary deployment and putting the right person in the right place, according to a plan.

Minori’s lips were pressed together, and she was really serious. Her large eyes looked as if they might tear up, her cheeks were flushed and tense, and her eyebrows had shot up as if she were angry. Everything showed that she had no intention of giving an inch.

“The way you assisted the PGLC this time was a big help, Minori. What you did was worth more than having another ten business staff members on-site. You were fantastic.”

At Shiroe’s words, Minori blinked.

“Similarly, Minori—if there’s something in front of you that needs to be done, and you’re able to do it, and someone wants you to, I think it’s a good thing. You can be proud of that. If, by doing it, you’re able to connect with something else, I think that’s also fine.”

Minori looked troubled.

That was only natural. Even Shiroe wasn’t saying this sort of thing because he understood. On the contrary, he’d avoided being involved with a guild because it seemed like too much trouble, and he wasn’t even qualified to talk like this. Even when viewed moderately, these were the sort of lines that should be said by people like Michitaka and Krusty, people who’d been leading their own guilds for a long time.

However, Shiroe had acquired companions too, and there were a few things he’d learned for the first time by creating his own guild. Even if you got stronger all by yourself, you were just a ghost. Strength gained that way was empty, not focused on anything. It was no more than spectral power, power whose touch the outside world could not feel, and could not be made to feel.

Strength you acquired on your own was still strength, of course, but Shiroe thought that in order to use that strength, you needed companions, and in order for those companions to live, you needed the world. Right now, its shape was still vague and unclear, but to Shiroe, Log Horizon was an important place that overflowed with that sort of thing.

“I’ll work just as hard as you’re working, Minori.”

Minori nodded with a face that seemed troubled or maybe angry, and surely heartrendingly sad. All Shiroe could do was feel sorry. In the end, the only answer he'd been able to give to this middle schooler's effort and questions had been evasive and incomplete.

Not only that, but he felt as if he'd been both scolded and encouraged.

There was no help for that, either.

The day's award for distinguished service went to this little girl. He was genuinely happy that this MVP was one of his companions. The fact that he'd taught her a little bit tickled him. Being looked up to as a senior member or teacher wasn't a bad feeling at all.

Smiling wryly, Shiroe nodded again.

"I'll work hard so I don't cause trouble for you, Minori."

► 4

Akatsuki, who'd run up the gray stairway muffling her rapid breathing, stopped abruptly. It would have been all right to go straight up to him as usual, but she couldn't do it: She didn't want Shiroe to notice she was out of breath.

Besides, the clothes she was wearing were feminine, something Henrietta had forced her into. The costume had fluttery bits here and there, and although it looked cute, it was too light. Akatsuki was used to combat wear. It made her feel defenseless, as if she were walking around half naked.

It also wasn't the least bit stealthy, so it wasn't a convenient outfit for sneaking up on Shiroe.

Slipping into the shadow of an ancient tree that hung out over the elevated walkway, Akatsuki caught her breath. She didn't want Shiroe to think she'd gotten agitated and come running up.

Over the past few days, Akatsuki had felt as if the distance between herself and Shiroe had gotten just a little smaller. Yesterday night at the guild hall, she'd touched his hair. It had been cooler than she'd expected, yet completely different from her own hair. A man's hair. It had been smooth and thick, and it had tickled Akatsuki's slim fingers as it fell. The sensation of his hair was still on her fingertips.

Just touching it had made her happy, and the experience had made her smile. When she'd assumed a glum expression on purpose and told Shiroe it was fun, Shiroe had looked bewildered and echoed her words back as a question.

That had been fun, too.

However, as a result of the decision to catch her breath, Akatsuki ended up eavesdropping.

Shiroe stood looking down over the firelit plaza from the elevated walkway, and there was a girl next to him.

It was Minori, one of Akatsuki's companions from Log Horizon.

Minori and Shiroe's conversation came to her, faintly, on the night wind that blew across Akiba.

"It's on purpose...isn't it?"

"Yes."

"...I'm sorry, Shiroe."

At first she didn't understand what they were talking about.

"It's nothing to apologize for. It isn't anything to make public, either."

"But I...I meddled, and I was trying to take you to the dinner party... Even though there wasn't any need to, now that I think about it. You're one of the eleven guilds; there's no way they wouldn't have sent you an invitation. In other words...you were planning to make Princess Raynesia dislike you, right from the start, weren't you."

At those words, Akatsuki very nearly made a noise.

He'd meant to make himself unpopular? *Shiroe*?

That was a perspective Akatsuki hadn't even considered.

At the unexpected exchange, Akatsuki forgot to call out to Shiroe. All she could do was listen. The autumn wind kept snatching the pair's conversation away, and it came to her in bits and pieces.

Akatsuki thought about Minori's words—*You were planning to make Princess Raynesia dislike you*—and as she understood what they implied, a little chill ran down her spine. Akatsuki had heard Shiroe's words as well, so she understood that someone had interfered with Akiba that day.

She was also aware that Shiroe had headed it off, even if she didn't know the details of his methods.

However, Akatsuki hadn't thought about it the way Minori had.

Unlike Minori, she'd never thought about how Shiroe looked to others.

Unlike Minori, she hadn't thought about what might happen to Log Horizon's position.

Unlike Minori, she hadn't distanced herself from Shiroe to go fight for his sake.

—Unlike Minori, she hadn't tried to rescue Shiroe from his pain.

Inside Akatsuki's flat chest, her heart began to pound.

Shiroe had seemed so close up until last night. Was he getting further and further away from her now? The idea was pure terror.

A loneliness like that of a small child abandoned in the darkness set up a wordless moan inside her chest.

Shiroe was going far away.

Or, no, had he always been far away?

Had the thought that he was beside her been no more than an illusion?

Ever since the day Shiroe had rescued her, she'd stayed close to him. She'd called him her liege, become his shadow, swung her katana to protect him. Meanwhile, she'd felt she was also being protected by Shiroe, but even that had been pleasant.

However, Akatsuki might have been the only one who thought they were protecting each other.

At the very least, I don't understand my liege that way...

It hurt to admit that.

She was inferior to her guild mate, that middle school girl.

The bitterness and pain of admitting she was losing were accompanied by the sensation of falling, as though the ground under her feet had frozen, turned brittle, and was crumbling away.

Akatsuki had unconsciously gripped a *kunai*, but now even that was wavering weakly. She'd come to a dim realization as well.

It was about her own limits, and what they meant.

It was true that Assassins boasted the greatest attack power of all the classes. Akatsuki herself had taken pride in continuing her combat training. Her attack power and individual combat abilities were probably top class, among all the Adventurers. However, although top class was top class, she was no more than a member of the top class.

Akatsuki had never participated in a large-scale battle before.

There was no help for that. Up until now, she'd been a solo player, not affiliated with any guild, and she'd led an aloof life. In order for solo players to participate in raids, they had to be picked up to fill vacancies when guilds recruited or wanted temporary participants. It was also possible to belong to a special group like the Debauchery Tea Party, but that had been an extremely rare case. It was quite a lot of work to gather Adventurers who weren't connected with guilds and create a group. It would have been easier to just start a guild, and that would have made it easier to gain honor.

In the first place, raids were a highly difficult style of play that required repeated practice in teamwork and combat. Conducting them with anything other than fixed members could mean only lowering the success rate of the entire operation. There was a good reason that big guilds equaled big raids.

Shiroe, Nyanta, and Naotsugu had all been solo players or members of small guilds, but they were super-top-class Adventurers who'd accumulated training in the Debauchery Tea Party, the best environment on the server.

In comparison, although naturally Akatsuki was top class and had trained to the limit for a solo player, in terms of completeness of equipment, skill in working with others, and knowledge, she wasn't super-top-class.

Am I...a fake...?

She hugged herself. Her body was trembling slightly.

The combat skills she'd always relied on, the skills she'd declared would let her protect Shiroe, weren't super-top-class. She'd known as much, but reconfirming this fact shattered Akatsuki's pride to smithereens.

Still, if that had been all, it would have been all right. Raids were a difficult play style that required cooperation from large groups. There were probably countless Adventurers who hadn't experienced them.

However, a mere Kannagi, one whose level was still low, was using a method Akatsuki had never even thought of and attempting to stand beside Akatsuki's liege. To Akatsuki, who had been proud of her combat skills and had made them the focus of her life in this other world, this was a shocking fact.

“What you did was worth more than having another ten business staff members on-site. You were fantastic.”

Shiroe’s voice echoed over and over.

Not only had the girl Minori read Shiroe’s thoughts, she’d fought on her own battlefield in order to lessen his burden. A little girl, a mere middle schooler, whose level wasn’t even half Akatsuki’s, had exercised the strength she had and soared past Akatsuki to the heights. And, on top of that, Minori had worried about Shiroe.

Shiroe, lonely. Akatsuki had never even imagined it.
That girl had attempted to soothe his loneliness.

That fact shattered Akatsuki. The awareness of it bit into her chest like broken glass, stealing the words she’d meant to say to Shiroe.

► 5

Little by little, the dinner party turned into a banquet in the plaza, but it was fantastically well received by all the residents of Akiba. By the end, Raynesia was limp. She had used up all her strength, but when she slumped onto the bench and gave a little wave, people thought she was adorable. Beautiful girls come out on top, no matter what they do.

Meanwhile, Shiroe continued to watch the party with Minori. That said, because Shiroe was still the acting counselor as far as the security system was concerned, all he could do was fire off telechats from the overhead walkway and occasionally speak with his companion.

Then that night ended, and the third day arrived.

During the afternoon of the final day, because it was a festival and those didn’t come around often, Shiroe and the rest of Log Horizon decided to get together and go look around the flea market.

Unlike at the autumn clothing and accessories exhibition, there were all sorts of things for sale at the flea market, from weapons and defensive gear to furniture; guild house facilities and equipment; as well as books and scrolls, foodstuffs, and monster drop items.

There were also crowds of People of the Earth peddlers who’d come from far-flung towns specifically for the this part of the event.

Feeling nostalgic, Nyanta and Shiroe looked around to see if there

was any merchandise from the village they'd stopped at on the way back from Susukino, but they didn't find any. Instead, Nyanta purchased some splendid salt pork ribs.

With this much merchandise in one place, it was only natural that the members' acquisitiveness was at full throttle. Touya bought a new Japanese-style helmet decorated with braided red thread, and Naotsugu stocked up on potions.

After Minori and Nyanta talked to him about it, Shiroe decided to dip into the guild's budget, and they bought a shared water tank and several rugs. They needed a variety of goods for winter, and there was so much merchandise here that they were spoiled for choice.

Following the banquet the previous night, Akatsuki had gone back to wearing her drab, black clothes. Today, the third day, her usual expression—the one that was so dignified it looked almost cross—had returned, and she was silently guarding Shiroe. Shiroe thought that, since it was a festival, she could have worn something a bit less plain, but Akatsuki seemed to have her own code.

Akatsuki had been visibly tired that morning, but Naotsugu teased her, and by evening, she was back to her usual self. When she called him “Stupid Naotsugu” while planting a flying knee-kick in his face, it looked just the same as it always did. Lately, even Shiroe had grown able to watch it with a wry smile.

As Shiroe had anticipated, the attack on the Round Table Council seemed to have died away completely. Once countered, this type of attack was hard to continue. He'd expected this, and Shiroe and the others enjoyed their first day off in a long time.

By and by the sun set, and Akiba plunged into the festival wrap party. There had been a banquet the previous night, and this time there was a full-fledged feast. Since it was being hosted by the Round Table Council, several liquor barrels were set in front of the guild center, and it turned into a lively gathering in which anyone could participate.

The Round Table Council had considered taking this opportunity to implement several support measures for the small and midsized guilds. One such measure was to issue invitations to solo players who were still unaffiliated with a guild. In addition, the topic of making single departments of major guilds independent had come up for discussion. At the banquet, even as they got drunk on liquor, young Adventurers debated.

Raynesia, back in her customary dress, was probably also attending the festival, which was illuminated by bonfires. Naturally, Michitaka, Krusty, Isaac, Calasin, Roderick, Marielle, and other

prominent members of the Round Table Council were probably draining glasses to strengthen connections with acquaintances and old friends and create new bonds.

Although there had been a lot of trouble, Akiba's Libra Festival ended its mission in success. In the light of the bonfires, no doubt the guild mates of Log Horizon were also praising each other's hard work and storing up the energy they'd need starting the next day.

And so the October Libra Festival came to an end, with few people even aware that there had been trouble. It proved to be a turning point for the town of Akiba.

INTERLUDE

However...

On the final day of the Libra Festival, in the dead of night, Shiroe left his guild members and went walking alone.

The place was a ruin in the south of Akiba, on the outskirts of town. Through a steel roll-up door that was buried in rubble, a damp, humid staircase stretched away. When this building had existed in the Age of Myth, the space had probably held the boiler and water tank. Countless pipes crawled across its bare concrete walls.

Shiroe had come here for a reason.

He was here to rendezvous with Oshima, an old acquaintance whom he'd planned to meet during the festival. Oshima had been ferreting out information about the Holy Empire of Westlande for him, and, assuming the worst, they were limiting their number of telechats. In addition, since he had items to give him as well, they'd planned to meet and exchange information in person, but he felt vaguely uneasy.

Shiroe advanced cautiously through darkness enveloped in stifled silence, moving by the weak light of the Magic Light he'd summoned with a whisper. He opened a door with a metal plate that had CONTROL ROOM written on it. The space behind it was more livable by human standards than the outside had been.

“

red, and even though she was only sitting on the sofa, she seemed to be slowly wriggling.

The woman was so beautiful that one glance was enough to spark an intense magnetism.

As far as “beautiful” was concerned, Akatsuki was a beautiful girl as well. However, the beauty in front of him exuded an attractiveness that was equal to Akatsuki’s, yet different in nature.

Shiroe didn’t ordinarily give much thought to women’s looks, and even for him, the glamour this beauty held was enough to make him feel drunk. Even though he had no such intention, his cheeks were growing hot.

“The ‘Oshima’ you’re waiting for has been unavoidably detained, Master Shiroe... I’m here because I was asked to deliver the message and report in his place.”

That was right: Shiroe had promised to meet Oshima the Adventurer here. Oshima was a young male dwarf with a small but agile-looking build, not a beautiful, black-haired woman.

DARIELLA / SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN / LEVEL 10

The information Shiroe confirmed on the status screen supported what she’d said. For that very reason, Shiroe shook his head, which was threatening to sweetly mist over, and managed to force his voice to work.

“...That’s a skill I’ve never heard of. What sort of camouflage is that, Miss Nureha?”

A gloomy underground control room.

The room wasn’t that large. A heavy silence fell between Shiroe and the woman on the sofa. As Shiroe stood, his entire body brimming with tension, the beauty giggled and squirmed, then sketched a small crest in the air with a fingertip.

As if to absorb Shiroe’s Magic Light, countless small, dark doves flew out of that beautiful black hair. No sooner had they flitted into space than they melted into the air. They were probably the effect of some unknown spell.

The woman’s fey, bewildering beauty was unchanged, but she now wore a jet-black gothic dress that might have been made from crow feathers, and she had ears and a tail that were snow white at the tips.

“*Fu-fu-fu. Uu-fu-fu.* ...How did you know, Master *Shiro*? I shouldn’t think there’s any information about the Overlay floating around anywhere...”

“Instinct.”

Shiroe bluffed.

It was true that the woman in the basement room had been a

Person of the Earth named Dariella. Her level had been only 10. Shiroe had confirmed this on her status screen. According to common sense in *Elder Tales*, that made it an established fact, and there was no way to overturn it. The only reasons Shiroe had been able to doubt it were information gained from a source in a system that was different from Oshima's, and intuition.

Shiroe had been certain that at this very moment, Nureha was somewhere in Akiba. He hadn't expected her to appear in front of him, but the idea that the cause of his worries had made an appearance made more sense than believing that the owner of beauty like that was just a Person of the Earth writer.

"Instinct...was it? But you did know my name, didn't you."

Nureha, the beauty in front of him, gave a bewitching laugh. Even though he knew who she really was, Shiroe couldn't stop his eyes from being drawn to her.

"Won't you sit down?"

Nureha looked up at Shiroe with dewy eyes. The angle made her white throat look defenseless, and Shiroe's mouth turned down in a scowl. He'd thought he'd stare if he didn't do that, and the idea had scared him.

"Don't be so wary. I'm— Well, I'm as you see. I don't even have a magic bag with me, and of course I'm unarmed. I'm all alone today. I only came to meet you, Master Shiro."

Even as he remained cautious, Shiroe sat down on an office chair beside the door. Nureha continued speaking to him in a velvety voice.

"Isn't that a bit careless for someone who rules the West?"

"I'm no ruler."

Nureha smiled.

Softly, with an air of secrecy, she put an index finger to her lips. There was something girlish and sweet about the gesture. Her age didn't seem to be much different from Shiroe's, but although her beauty remained unchanged, the gesture made her atmosphere shimmer unstably. Just when he thought she was a voluptuous woman, she showed a profile like an innocent young girl's.

Enchanting, but scary. That was what Shiroe thought.

There, like a riot of white flowers in pitch-black darkness, was a lunatic, sweetly intoxicating beauty.

After all, this woman was the guild master of Plant Hwyaden.

The beautiful woman who reigned at the top of Plant Hwyaden, an enormous guild that everyone knew existed, but whose true shape remained unclear: That was Nureha, State Councillor of the West.

It had begun about the time Shiroe had launched the Round Table Council.

Back then, Shiroe had been attempting to return energy and order to Akiba, which had been completely disheartened by the Catastrophe, and whose public order had deteriorated.

At the same time, a similar situation had occurred in Minami, the player town in the West. Chaos and depression and deteriorating order. There had also been an Adventurer who'd tried to change it, as Shiroe had done.

This had been Nureha, the disheveled beauty seated in front of him.

However, both the vision for self-government that she'd proposed and the means she'd chosen had been completely different from Shiroe's.

Nureha had approached the House of Saimiya. The House of Saimiya were descendents of the Westlande Imperial Dynasty, which had ruled Yamato in the old days, and they boasted rank of the first order in Yamato's aristocracy. Unlike the East, which was governed by the League of Free Cities, the Holy Empire of Westlande was ruled through centralized authority by the House of Saimiya, who lived in the city of Kyou, and by governing duchies.

Of course, these were People of the Earth governments, and ordinarily, they would have had no bearing on the Adventurers. He'd heard that, even after the Catastrophe, the Adventurers who lived in the West had taken no interest in the People of the Earth or their aristocracy.

However, Nureha had been different. She'd gotten close to the nobles and the House of Saimiya and had gained their favor. Her methods remained a mystery, but in any event, Nureha had used her charms to ingratiate herself with the People of the Earth, and she had sown poison.

Around the time Shiroe and the others had traveled to Susukino, the Guards of the town of Minami had become Nureha's private army. Using the wealth of the People of the Earth, Nureha had also purchased Minami's Temple zone.

Vast military might and power over life and death. Nureha had gained both these things, but she hadn't put herself in the public eye. She advanced her plans quietly, peacefully, secretly. The guild she'd created, Plant Hwyaden, gradually acquired supporters, and before anyone noticed, it had grown quite large. Not only that, but its members were all veteran players and the strongest in the West.

Then, one day, Nureha had made a proclamation:

“All Adventurers living in the town of Minami must join Plant Hwyaden.”

A town that had no discrimination among guilds, because there was only one.

This had been the shape of the new self-government Nureha had created.

“My apologies for contradicting you, but you are the ruler of the West... Even if you *do* leave the practical business to Indicus, Misuha, and Zeldus.”

“I’m not leaving it to them, you know. Everyone simply does as they please. I have no intention of restricting them. I’m only giving everyone a place to belong... And in exchange, they protect me. That’s all I want.”

Her words, spoken in smooth tones, echoed like a siren song. Her sweet whisper sounded like soft words of love, and the seduction would have made anyone male want to listen forever.

“State your business here.”

“Such impatience, Master Shiro.”

“I know my place.”

“...*U-fu-fu*. Very well. If you say so, Master Shiro, I’ll match my pace to the gentleman. I—I came with an invitation for you, Master Shiro. Come to Plant Hwyaden. Come stay by my side. Walk with me, and protect me.”

“Why?”

“It’s just as I’ve said. I want you, Master Shiro. ...It’s a rather embarrassing thing to discuss, but I’ve known about you for *ages*.”

That wasn’t a startling idea.

Both Shiroe and Nureha were Enchanters. Enchanter wasn’t a popular class in *Elder Tales*, and the play population was only half that of the average class.

In the days when *Elder Tales* was still a normal game, there had probably been about eighty thousand players, but as far as Shiroe knew, there had only been about two thousand level-90 Enchanters.

In MMORPGs, people are curious about other Adventurers in their class. What sort of equipment do they use? How are they training? How do they fight? Since it was a game, it was easiest to learn techniques and growth policies by studying players whose environments were similar to your own; basically, it was possible to learn from players who were more skilled than you were.

This way of thinking was very close to common sense for gamers.

There had been only a handful of Adventurers who had belonged to major guilds, had collected good equipment in raids, and were studying combat. If limited to Enchanters, the number dropped to

about a hundred. With just one hundred people, it was possible to learn their names.

As a matter of fact, Shiroe had a fairly good grasp of the names of the ranker-class Enchanters on the Japanese server. This was how he'd known Nureha.

Like Shiroe, Nureha was an Enchanter who hadn't joined a guild. Enchanters who weren't affiliated with a major guild yet still participated in raids and exercised their talents were more of a rare endangered species than the Iriomote cat. They must have met each other two or three times. For a veteran player like Shiroe, an industry of one hundred people wasn't large at all.

"...I know what you're thinking, Master Shiro, but that isn't it. I didn't know about you because you're an Enchanter, and that isn't why I want you."

"What do you mean?"

Nureha didn't look away.

Fixing Shiroe with an enraptured gaze that seemed to pour something into him, she continued speaking. Her words were like knives.

"You discovered a new type of magic at Zantleaf, didn't you? I don't know the specific method, but... A magic that makes large-scale changes... You're an extraordinary person, Master Shiro, so I expected you'd do something of the sort."

"That makes two of us, then, doesn't it? I don't know how you did it, but you've reactivated your Town Gate. From what I hear, you can't make free use of it yet, but even so."

In the underground room, in the midst of an atmosphere so strained it was almost palpable, Shiroe and Nureha gazed at each other.

He hadn't thought the matter of the contract technique had been leaked, but then Shiroe had information on the West's new technology as well. Striking back against the blade of words that had been turned on him, Shiroe glared at Nureha.

"I knew you were special, Master Shiro. You know everything. The idea that you might even know what lies behind my veil makes my cheeks burn."

"Enough flattery. ...Information from the West is being blocked on your orders, correct?"

Plant Hwyaden was a stand-alone guild with strict controls. On the inside, it was an extremely sophisticated, finely structured organization.

He knew the slogan Nureha had used.

Get rid of the large guilds' discrimination against the small and midsized guilds, restore public order in Minami, and work together to return to the real world. The most efficient way to make these things happen was for a single guild to organize it. Some aspects of Minami's claims were true. Shiroe acknowledged their advantages as well.

However, due to that idea, Plant Hwyaden, which had been created for those reasons, had become a well-disciplined organization with sophisticated organizing ability.

In other words, it had become a clannish organization that didn't leak information.

Since the Round Table Council took the form of a self-governing council of free guilds, it was necessary to hold debates openly. Disclosure of information was the foundation of debate. As a result, its movements were probably completely transparent to outsiders.

On the other hand, Plant Hwyaden was a single guild managed by an executive department, and it wasn't possible to get a clear grasp of the actual form of its center. Shiroe was one of the most well-informed people in Akiba, and even to him, Plant Hwyaden's full shape was riddled with mysteries. Most of Akiba's Adventurers probably knew only that it was a creepy area run by a single guild.

The day's original objective—meeting Oshima—had been to get new information on Minami and receive a few items.

“No. I said so earlier, remember? I believe in noninterference. The information blocking was Misuha's personal decision.”

“Was that true of the processing saturation attack on Akiba's Round Table Council as well?”

“Yes. That was a reckless, independent act by Malves, a shortsighted member of the House of Lords.”

As if he could believe that. Shiroe was about to tell her that was called tacit approval when, as if to block his words, Nureha touched Shiroe's lips with a delicate white fingertip.



Shiroe hadn't noticed her draw nearer, and he knocked her arm away.

"I came to invite you, Master Shiro. Would you come to me?"

"Soujirou's the one to ask for that sort of thing. It isn't my department."

"Soujirou, hmm?"

A dangerous gleam appeared in Nureha's eyes, but the next instant, it changed to a slightly troubled expression.

"I prefer you to Soujirou, Master Shiro. I think you're more extraordinary than he is. I came to this town to issue an invitation to you alone, to entreat you alone."

At those words, Shiroe felt as if his vision had gone pure white.

He sensed no sincerity from the woman in front of him.

He felt instinctively that she was made up of lies and sin. However, even though he knew, the temptation was enough to dazzle him. Even he thought his immunity to women was far too low.

Still, no one's ever told me I was more extraordinary than Soujirou before, so... I'm so lame.

"...You won't?"

"No, because it isn't true."

"...I wonder."

Nureha spoke in a low voice, her eyes downcast.

The aura that had seemed to twine around Shiroe until now disappeared, replaced by a faint, fragile atmosphere.

"Then if I tell the truth, will you come to me?"

"I can't make that decision until I've heard the truth."

"The truth isn't a nice thing, you know."

With her expression as fragile as aged pottery, Nureha gave a husky laugh.

"...Very well. Because it's you, Master Shiro. Because you're special. Because you *are* special. Because there's only one of you. I'll have to show equivalent resolve, I suppose. Yes, I know. I've been waiting for this moment for a long, long time..."

Nureha's words continued, like a curse.

"You see, Master Shiro, I'm...a homely woman."

"Huh?!"

"I'm honored by your surprise, but it's true. I was an ugly child: My eyes were large and staring, I was skinny and poor—all I knew was how to look up hungrily at those around me."

Shiroe's surprise was only natural. The beauty in front of him did have eyes that tended to be too intense, but if asked, anyone would have said she was bewitching.

However, her tale unfolded in a direction Shiroe hadn't even considered.

"When I was in elementary school, I really was too thin. It wasn't just that my ribs showed; it went far beyond that. The bones in my arms and legs showed, too. My hair grew long and unkempt, and my clothes were grimy. I was a dirty girl, more than an ugly one.

"When I began middle school, I grew, but I didn't gain much weight. I was as skinny and bony as ever, and I looked up through my bangs at those around me with saucer eyes. That's the sort of creepy girl I was, I think.

"That changed when...I believe it was in my second year of middle school. I happened to get my hands on a little money, and I finally started to eat proper meals. At first, even then, my body was reluctant to accept them, but ever so gradually, I gained weight... However, I was still skinny, just the same. I'd only gone from having a creepy body that showed its bones to being thin."

That's...

Shiroe thought it might have been some kind of abuse.

He also wondered whether the story was really true.

Even if Nureha had begun her tale by saying, *I'm going to tell you a true story*, it was far too late for him to trust her: Oshima wasn't here. Through some unknown method, Nureha had gotten the information about Oshima's meeting with Shiroe out of him, and she had gotten there ahead of him. That was an immutable fact.

Besides, no matter how gentle her voice was now, this woman was the guild master of Plant Hwyaden, the single guild that controlled Minami.

However, on the other hand, even if he'd been told, *This story is a lie*, he couldn't have taken that at face value: If a liar told nothing but lies, they might just as well be honest.

Liars were beings who could tell the truth.

"I'd begun to care about my appearance, but even so, I was the sort of poor girl you'd find anywhere. Flat chest, skinny arms and legs. An ordinary face, except that my eyes were large. The most common evaluation I received at the time was 'unlucky girl.' *Fu-fu-fu!* I think it wasn't simply my appearance they were speaking of. There was probably something inside me that couldn't help but be called that... Still, even so: There were people who wanted me just because I was a middle schooler, just because I was young. I won't excuse myself by saying I did it to live, or that I had no choice. Having people flatter and fawn over me made me happy, and I felt as if I were walking on air."

In response to what he was hearing, a creeping revulsion assailed

Shiroe.

Was it true?

If it was true, being in close proximity to something like that was unpleasant.

Is it a lie?

If it was a lie, then the woman who was going out of her way to tell him a story like that was unpleasant.

“Master Shiro?”

By the time he noticed, Nureha’s eyes were startlingly close. Nureha was looking up into Shiroe’s, smiling darkly.

“You see? The truth is dull, isn’t it? What purpose does this story serve? And in any case, what of this world is true? These bodies and the skills they hold are all nothing but lies, and in this world, the truth has less value than rubbish. Master Shiro. If you come to me, I’ll be your lover. Would that not please you? I have this body now. This white, warm body everyone admires. ...Or don’t you like women like me?”

Shiroe tasted something salty in his mouth and realized for the first time that he’d bitten his lip.

His temperature was rising, and his face was hot.

The curves of her white bosom that showed through her black satin dress. The slim fingers that moved constantly, as if beckoning. A coaxing expression, melting tones. A fragrance like shortcake, so sweet it would make you want to eat it even when you knew it was poisoned.

“I had to please gentlemen with a meager body, so I’m practiced. ...I’m good at lying, too, you know. If you only close your eyes to the fact that it’s a lie, I believe I can make you happy. Yes, until you’re satisfied. I’ll be at your side at sunrise, sunset, until the world fades into twilight...”

“Why?”

“...Are reasons necessary?”

“If I can’t think it’s real, there’s no point.”

“As I said, just accept that it’s a lie... Or fiction, in any case.”

Words so sweet they might have been smeared with honey fell from charming lips like pale pink jelly, pouring slowly into Shiroe. His eyes saw Nureha’s imploring, teasing, enigmatic smile and her swaying fox’s tail.

“...Fic...tion?”

“Yes. It’s fiction. That’s right. A made-up story—the story of a friend of mine, an older girl... One day, that girl encountered *Elder Tales*. It was a pastime far removed from the world in which she lived. Even so, she became fascinated by it. Do you know why?”

Shiroe didn’t.

He couldn't answer.

"Because, in that game, she could have her ideal body. If she only had that, she'd be protected, and wanted, and be given things. The happiness she'd wanted so badly she'd nearly vomited blood would be hers. Because, in that world, she could have a beautiful face and a body that captivated the opposite sex. But you know... That's funny, isn't it? After all, it was only a game."

Shiroe's tongue was gummy; it seemed to be stuck to the inside of his mouth, and he couldn't speak. Nureha went on.

"She...isn't popular. It's as though she was ugly, even in the game. Even with a matchless body and beauty, she hasn't gotten what she wanted. —Well, it is an MMO: Just being a woman is enough to guarantee you a warm welcome, to some extent. It's enough to ensure you praise. Still, even so, she doesn't have as much as she wanted. For some reason, the people she wishes she had, the people she wants to make hers, won't give her the time of day. Why do you suppose that is? There are women whose looks are much more ordinary than hers, and yet they're far more popular. Just because they're cheerful and optimistic, everyone protects them. There are girls like that, and yet..."

Nureha's eyes seemed to have become jet-black caves that were trying to swallow Shiroe.

"She did her best, even so... She learned how to speak like a lady, so that men would be pleased with her. She studied the sorts of gestures men like. She tidied up her clothes and her hair. It's silly, but she dressed up and went out, even on her days off. Just pitiful, isn't it?" She snickered at that. "But still, it did no good. Oh, please don't look like that. It wasn't completely useless. You see, I can use the skills I acquired that way to entertain you, Master Shiro... That's not a bad deal, is it?"

It was sweet, fragrant, gentle on his ears, enchantingly beautiful—but it was rotten. Yet Shiroe was fascinated by that illness.

Even though Nureha's offer was fatally warped, it was dizzyingly appealing, and it had enough magic to captivate his soul.

"About my friend... Even so, one day, a day when she was in the depths of despair, someone spoke to her. 'You're very skilled,' he said. 'Even though you're a solo player. You have my respect.' ...Another Enchanter said this to her. Well, Master Shiro? What do you think? Can you be satisfied with a make-believe story like this one?"

"That's..."

Was it real? Shiroe couldn't ask. He had no memory of any such conversation. However, he couldn't declare that she'd made it up. He'd forgotten until he'd met her again just now, but he really had

teamed up with Nureha to fight several times.

Because he'd had the Tea Party's reputation behind him, Shiroe had often been called in by others to assist them in raids. It had probably been the same for Nureha. Enchanters weren't all that necessary on ordinary adventures, but raids were long, and that made their MP recovery abilities very useful.

He couldn't say they hadn't had that sort of conversation when they'd met at one of those times.

Of course, the fact that he didn't remember meant that, even if he had said those words, he could guarantee he hadn't meant anything special by them. Shiroe wasn't the type to try to win women over with words like those. He didn't think he was that smooth of a guy. However, precisely because that was the case, it was possible he'd said that to her because it was what he really felt, without meaning anything in particular by it.

Shiroe couldn't ask whether it was true or not.

Having forgotten seemed like a cruel betrayal.

"Master Shiro, please. Come be with me. I'll prepare a place for you at Plant Hwyaden. I've asked the House of Saimiya, and preparations to grant you the title of Scrivener are already in place. The House of Saimiya eats out of our hand. You almost understand it, don't you, Master Shiro? The Fraction. Our return to reality."

At her words, in spite of himself, Shiroe gulped.

"Ah-ha! I knew it; you did react! You really are extraordinary, Master Shiro. We know, you see. How to return."

There was no telling how far Nureha had read Shiroe. Whispering those words, she licked her red lips lightly with the tip of her tongue. When Shiroe averted his eyes from the seductive gesture, she giggled like a little girl.

"We've discovered a way to return to the real world."

"You can't prove it's a way to return... Since you can't prove it, you're only making people disappear."

"With your cooperation, Master Shiro, we could make it so that isn't the case, could we not?"

To be honest, at this point, Shiroe was very near to agreeing to Nureha's proposal.

It wasn't because he'd been captivated by her.

It was because he was interested in the techniques and information Nureha had obtained. Nureha had unified the West. If he was with her, he'd be able to acquire far more information than he would by staying in Akiba. Whether it was acquiring information or developing new technologies, everything would be much easier to obtain if he used the power of the enormous organization Nureha had

created. In terms of returning to the real world, it was an efficient path. It might be all right to call it the path that would benefit all Adventurers.

No, that logic was only an excuse.

What Nureha had held out to him was far too attractive.

Not her own body and beauty. Having someone call him extraordinary had firmly awakened a forgotten loneliness inside Shiroe. Having people need him was Shiroe's weakness. That weakness had once made him a guest at many guilds, and at the same time, it had hurt him.

Nureha was crazy and dangerous: That was as clear as day. However, for that very reason, Shiroe almost accepted her invitation. Whether what she said was true or not, wasn't he the only one who could stop her? There was a sense of danger about that, but at the same time, it was a sweet temptation that tickled Shiroe's self-consciousness.

Shiroe felt responsible.

Even if Shiroe had no personal responsibility, the ache he felt, the one that resembled guilt, was an emotion with roots in responsibility. It was like a sense of guilt without an actual crime. The worst of it was that Nureha understood this as well.

“—In any case, Master Shiro, you don't have a reason, do you?”

“A reason?”

Shiroe echoed the words. Nureha was gazing at him intently, feverishly.

“Yes, a reason. You are...a person without a reason, aren't you? You have no internal reason for supporting Akiba, and no reason for supporting the People of the Earth, do you? A vague sense of ethics... Isn't that all you have? No, it's fine. That has no bearing on my desire for you, Master Shiro. However, I think it's painful for you. So...”

At a distance so close they could have touched, so close he could feel her warmth, Nureha put her lips next to Shiroe's ear.

“Make me, Nureha, your excuse, Master Shiro. If you do, you'll be able to release your power completely, won't you? You'll be able to give full play to all that ingenuity, without being a slave to restrictions and regulations. All I want is you, Master Shiro. That means you can use me as a reason, as an excuse, to do all sorts of selfish things.”

The decisive words of temptation were also a farewell.

Give full play to his ingenuity. That was a big temptation. To Shiroe, who had abruptly found himself pulled into another world one day, had been dragged into deteriorating public order and trouble, and had made it through the panic of one danger after another, the desire to use that trend as a pretext to make his power felt had been as

enormous as the stinging desire to touch the beautiful woman before him.

It wasn't Shiroe's fault they'd come to this world.

That feeling of blame was the scream of the souls of all the Adventurers who'd been summoned to this world: They wanted to know why. They wanted justice to be guaranteed. They wanted there to be meaning, somewhere, in fighting. It was likely that this anger at injustice blazed in the depths of the soul of every Adventurer.

Nureha had been right.

It was a temptation in the correct sense of the word.

However, he couldn't view reasons and excuses as the same thing. That would be showing contempt for the results of those actions.

The contact of their fingertips, grateful smiles, the nightlong banquet that had been so much fun, having desserts pushed at him from all sides, adventuring across vast plains together... It would mean cheapening all these things.

If he felt any good will toward Nureha, if he felt even a little of anything that was the least bit like love, he shouldn't use her as an excuse.

That was something Shiroe could state positively only now that he'd gained a "reason."

It was something he was able to declare because he had Log Horizon.

"Oh..."

Shiroe had pushed Nureha away. As she looked at him, the fox ears that adorned her black hair moved as if perplexed.

"I've decided to believe all of the made-up story you told me. However, I can't go with you."

Frozen, Nureha gazed into Shiroe's eyes as though she hadn't given up completely. Her lips were trembling. As if clinging to him, still despaired: "Why?"

"Because it's probably more in line with your wish to have me as an enemy than an ally."

Staring into Nureha's eyes of his own accord for the first time, Shiroe spoke each word clearly, as if verifying his own will. As he felt the words stab Nureha like swords, and the pain of them, Shiroe touched her cool cheek.

"I'll be your enemy, when you look for a reason someday."

Shiroe's words became an invisible chain that linked the two of them.

Before long, that chain would lead Akiba and Minami to the Sky Labyrinth of Imbrium, and on to the Sea of Soma.



CAPTAIN
NYANTA'S

AKIBA

GOURMET GUIDE

Mew dishes appear in Akiba every day. This time,
I'll present some particularly popular foods.

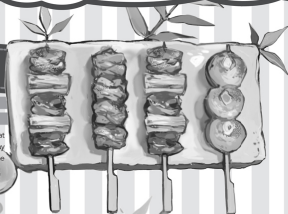
Food illustrations by 24

INGREDIENTS SELECTED BY
CONNOISSEURS
LIZARD SHISH-KERABS

Sold by: Yabiko Tanshin

Wildness level: ★★

A standard dish made with lizard meat
washed only with water. Crunchy
on the outside, juicy on the inside. The
essence of meat!



THANKS YOUR BODY AND SOUL!
BOK CHUY AND
SAUSAGE
POT-AU-FEU

Sold by: Le Maison Boucieu Blanc

Warming level: ★★

The tender sausage pops and meat
juices gush out when you sink your
teeth into it. The spicy mustard is the
real deal.



DESERT OF EVERLASTING
SUMMER
COLDPLANE BERRY,
BANANA, AND WHIPPED
CREAM CREPE

Sold by: West Coast Sweets

Quaint level: ★★

Fully ripe, exquisitely sweet bananas
and the coolness of coldplane berries
create a dessert with a special flair!



[A HOME-COOKED CLASSIC]
SPECIAL ONIGIRI

Sold by: Onigiri Shop Enmauabi

Crispability level: ★★★★★

A sampler of three different flavors
from a popular handmade onigiri
specialty shop. Bananas made by
beautiful girls often sell out early in
the morning.





[THESE MEAT BUNS ARE EXPLOSIVE!]
**PORK AND BAMBOO SHOOT
STEAMED BUNS**

Sold by: Huge Explosion Huge
Chinese Restaurant

Hot! Hot! level: ★★★★★

The fluffy wrappers, crunchy bamboo shoots, and gushing meat juice are out of this world. Eat up while they're hot!

[THE SECRET INGREDIENT IS
THE PROPRIETRESS'S SMILE]
**PACIFIC SAURY AND
BACON PLUM STEW**

Sold by: Hydrangea Japanese Restaurant

Simplicity level: ★★★

A dish made of seasonal Pacific saury stewed with bacon and plums. The refreshing flavor of the plums lends a velvety texture to the fatty Pacific saury.



[HAPPINESS IS A TOASTY
GOLDEN BROWN!]
JUST-FRIED CROQUETTES

Sold by: Topoto Boss's Deli

B-grade gourmet level: ★★★★★

Piping-hot potato croquettes fried in sunflower oil have a good old-fashioned flavor. With a generous secret blend of vegetables and salty-sweet sauce.



[THE RED JEWEL OF CHOUSHI]
ASCOT CRAB COQUILLE

Sold by: Beach House Shiosai

Crab level: ★★★★★

A gourmet baked dish packed with Ascot Crab meat, white sauce, herbs, carrots, and onions.



[RECOVER YOUR ENERGY!]
**MATCHA-FLAVORED
RECOVERY YOUKAN**

Sold by: Torina Group Forty-Eight

Snack level: ★★

A completely new Japanese-style dessert, made by beating an HP-recovery-speed increase potion into a sweet green tea-flavored red-bean jelly. Strangely enough, it's very popular!



[LEGENDARY GOLDEN FRIED RICE]
**FRIED RICE WITH
THREE-EYED BIRD EGGS**

Sold by: Flame Cooking Club

Golden level: ★★★★★

Fried rice that makes lavish use of the eggs of the Three-Eyed Birds in the Shinjuku Imperial Gardens. The only add-ons are char siu pork and white scallions. Simple is best.



SHIROE'S DAY

**AKATSUKI'S
DAY**

- ▶ **07:00** Wake up with the alarm clock that's just been invented.
- ▶ **07:30** Breakfast. Check everyone's schedules for the day.
- ▶ **08:00** Do paperwork in own room in guild house.

- ▶ **10:00** Michitaka visits to discuss pending issues from Round Table Council.
- ▶ **11:00** Return to paperwork. There's more

▶ **12:00** Lunch.

► **13:00** Go to Round Table Council in guild center. As expected, more clerical work here.

▶ **15:00** Run into Akatsuki by chance; have tea with her in lieu of short break.

▶ **15:30** Return to guild house and do paperwork.

▶ **19:00** Dinner.

▶ **20:00** Relax in hall after dinner. Have tea and chat with everybody.

► **21:00** Go back to paperwork.

► **22:00** Talk about dumb stuff with Nyanta and Naotsugu.

► **23:00** Take bath, after the ladies have finished.

01:00 Give up on preparing tomorrow's paperwork. Sleep.

► **05:30** Get up. Wide awake, even if not awakened by anything.

► **06:00** Endurance run and morning kata practice. Touya sometimes comes along lately but sometimes sleeps in.

► **07:00** Take cold bath, then go wake up liege. Kneel formally in front of alarm clock and wait.

► **07:30** Wait for liege, then eat breakfast.

► **08:00** Combat training in field. Occasionally oversee Touya's group.

- ▶ **12:00** Lunch (bentos).
- ▶ **13:00** Gather information in Akiba. Guard guild house area.

▶ **14:20** Laundry. Wash liege's things carefully!

► **15:00** Observe Shiroe. If given the chance, ask for tea.

► **16:00** Go around to related guilds, pick up files and letters for Log Horizon.

▶ **16:15** Get caught by Henrietta.

► **16:35** Make an appearance at Raynesia's manor.

▶ **18:00** Bathe.

▶ **19:00** Dinner. Grab seat next to liege.

▶ **20:00** Report results of training and information gathering to Shiroe.

► **21:00** In own room, maintain battle gear and organize items.

► **22:00** Lay out futon and go to bed.

6:00

12:00

18:00

24:00

3:00

**A Full View
of Life in
*Elder Tales***

**A
DAY
IN
THE
MEMBERS'
LIVES**



**NAOTSUGU'S
DAY**

- ▶ **07:00** Get up. Stretch to chase away sleepiness, forcing self to wake up.
- ▶ **07:30** Breakfast with guild members.
- ▶ **08:00** Combat training in field. Often do combined training with Crescent Moon League. Action city.
- ▶ **12:00** Lunch.
- ▶ **13:00** Accept short-term quest at guild center. Hunting or guarding gatherers. With Griffin, this is a cakewalk.
- ▶ **15:00** ...That was a lie. It isn't a cakewalk. Panic a bit.
- ▶ **16:00** Try to pick up souvenir for Crescent Moon League and end up forming monster train. Sprint-like-heck city.
- ▶ **17:30** Will end up missing dinner if this keeps up, so get serious.
- ▶ **19:00** Somehow make it in time for dinner.
- ▶ **20:00** Chat while teasing Akatsuki and Shiroe.
- ▶ **21:00** Have great talk with Rudy and Touya about Akiba's ten best poster girls, and get yelled at by Minori and Isuzu. With no help for it, go take bath.
- ▶ **22:00** Go check on Shiroe. Help with paperwork, just a little.
- ▶ **24:00** Do some light stretches, then hit the sack.



**MINORI
& TOUYA'S
DAY**

- ▶ **06:30** Wake up. Touya sometimes goes out to train. Minori gets breakfast ready.
- ▶ **07:30** Breakfast.
- ▶ **08:00** Go out to field and hunt. Destination depends on the day.
- ▶ **12:00** Lunch (bentos).
- ▶ **13:00** Go somewhere else and hunt some more. If there's something that can be gathered, may gather it.
- ▶ **15:30** Return to guild house. Minori helps Shiroe with paperwork. Touya goes along on shopping trips to carry purchases.
- ▶ **18:30** Bathe. Minori goes in with Isuzu. Touya and Rudy bathe together, afterward.
- ▶ **19:00** Help set table, then eat dinner.
- ▶ **20:00** Gather in hall. The funnest time of the day. Sometimes play with others.
- ▶ **23:00** Sleep.



**NYANTA'S
DAY**

- ▶ **06:00** Wake up. Groom fur.
- ▶ **06:30** Prepare breakfast. Make bentos, too. This is easy to do in the morning.
- ▶ **07:30** Breakfast with guild members.
- ▶ **08:00** Lead younger group; depending on day, go to Crescent Moon League as guest teacher.
- ▶ **12:00** Eat lunch at destination.
- ▶ **13:00** Receive guests at guild house. Various deliveries arrive, too.
- ▶ **15:30** Go buy ingredients. Serara sometimes comes along.
- ▶ **17:00** Dinner preparations, prep for breakfast, etc.
- ▶ **19:00** Dinner.
- ▶ **20:00** Relax in hall after dinner. Have everyone taste-test new dessert.
- ▶ **21:00** Clear away and clean. Evening grooming session.
- ▶ **22:00** Take tea to Shiroe. Give him advice.
- ▶ **23:00** Maintain tools and prepare for adventures.
- ▶ **24:00** Go to bed.



6:00

12:00

18:00

24:00

3:00

RAYNESIA'S DAY

▶ **06:30** Wake up. Immediately go back to sleep.

▶ **07:15** Get up. Get dressed with Elissa's help.

▶ **07:45** Breakfast. Hear the day's schedule.

▶ **10:00** Do paperwork and examine deliveries. Churn out thank-you notes.

▶ **11:30** Energy runs out.

▶ **12:00** Disguise self and go out. Suspect that Adventurers may have caught on. Buy lunch. When unable to go out, have Elissa buy it. Eat.

▶ **13:00** Wait at embassy. Receive guests. Must use head for this, so get discouraged.

▶ **14:30** Consciousness grows misty.

▶ **15:00** Forced by Elissa to change clothes, for some reason.

▶ **15:30** Krusty often comes with bothersome goods or documents. Once he's had tea, he leaves. It's convenient when Krusty's here, because work doesn't come.

▶ **16:00** Work ends. If Elissa's guard is lax, can nap. (About once a week.)

▶ **17:30** Dinner. At twice-weekly dinner parties, dine with guests.

▶ **19:00** Bathe. Relax. Get a massage, have scented oil rubbed in, have hair combed. Akiba's baths are pleasant.

▶ **21:00** Have clothes changed by Elissa while she lectures.

▶ **21:30** Go to bed.



KRUSTY'S DAY

▶ **06:00** Wake earlier than usual. Spruce self up alone. Have tea.

▶ **06:30** Kill time by glancing over information (prepared last night) on merchants and nobles who are scheduled for conferences.

▶ **07:00** Gather in cafeteria; breakfast. Guild executives often eat here.

▶ **08:00** Guild meeting. There's casual banter, just like when this was a game, which is pleasant.

▶ **09:00** Take paperwork and materials that need to be read outside. Write instructions in shade under trees while watching guild combat training out of corner of eye.

▶ **11:00** Meet with People of the Earth merchants and nobles with appointments. Messages function properly and all ends easily.

▶ **12:00** Lunch gathering. Sometimes at Raynesia's manor. Usually eat with leaders of ally guilds.

▶ **15:05** Go observe Raynesia at embassy.

▶ **16:30** Join practical combat training in the middle of the session. Check teamwork meant for use in raid battles.

▶ **18:00** Bathe.

▶ **19:00** Dinner / briefing session. Exchange and share information, distribute work among members.

▶ **20:00** Personal time in study with coffee. Complete routine business placidly.

▶ **21:00** Go out to train alone. Head to hard hunting grounds like Shinjuku Imperial Gardens Underground.

▶ **01:30** Run out of consumable items, so training ends.

▶ **02:00** Take a cold bath, and finally go to sleep.



6:00

12:00

18:00

24:00

MARIELLE'S DAY

- ▶ **06:00** Get woken up by Henrietta. ...But fight it.
- ▶ **07:30** Wake self up.
- ▶ **08:15** Eat in guild cafeteria. More and more people come in, and at some point, the meal turns fun.
- ▶ **09:30** Pretend to do paperwork and explore the hall. Everyone's working seriously.
- ▶ **12:00** Lunch. "Partake" with other guild members who've stayed in.
- ▶ **13:00** Go for walk. Stop by Snack Shop Crescent Moon to see how things are going.
- ▶ **15:00** Sampling meeting for new Crescent Moon items....Actually, just snitching food.
- ▶ **17:00** Meet up with the suburban gathering team. Pick lots of berries.
- ▶ **19:30** A fun noisy dinner. All members are there. Hear about all sorts of things that happened today.
- ▶ **20:30** Bathe with the female members. Buying a big bath was a really good idea.
- ▶ **21:30** Joke around with Henrietta while writing journal.
- ▶ **22:00** Fall asleep hugging pillow. Today was another gold-star day.



MICHITAKA'S DAY

- ▶ **06:00** Get up. Even if mood is good on waking, it's torpedoed by the drift of documents burying the desk.
- ▶ **06:30** Start early-morning run.
- ▶ **07:00** Check latest rumors in Akikuro and elsewhere. Do a little paperwork.
- ▶ **08:00** Breakfast with main staff of Marine Organization. Go over the day's schedule.
- ▶ **09:00** Meet with outside material-procurement supervisors. Exchange information on field states and situations at related guilds.
- ▶ **10:00** More deskwork. Finish about half before lunch. Pace is good so far.
- ▶ **12:00** Lunch with other production guild executives.
- ▶ **13:00** Meeting with Round Table Council members at guild center (aka pushing work off onto one another).
- ▶ **14:00** Stop by production guild neighborhood and discuss new ideas with Blacksmith and Mechanist groups. Also discuss techniques that are theoretically possible but probably best avoided.
- ▶ **15:00** Prototype for new device for Ocypete at workshop. Swing hammer at forge. Feel restless if this isn't done every day.
- ▶ **16:00** Dinner #1. Snack on onigiri or sandwiches with people at forge.
- ▶ **17:00** Talk about the screw system with members who are good at engineering.
- ▶ **18:00** Stay holed up in workshop too long; just barely make it to guild management meeting.
- ▶ **19:00** Progress report. Issues brought up include storehouse management and grasping location.
- ▶ **20:00** Start paperwork again. This is a big guild, so even material transactions make for a vast amount.
- ▶ **21:00** Dinner #2. One recent score was discovery of local food stall whose cooking suits own taste.
- ▶ **22:00** Guild members take pity, and everyone organizes the files together. Would rather burn them.
- ▶ **23:30** Turns into sampling meeting for new distilled liquor, for some reason. The taste is iffy, but it's fun to drink with friends.
- ▶ **01:30** Go to bed without really being aware of it.



SOUJIROU'S DAY

- ▶ **06:30** Awakened by the guild member on duty. (Daily rotation.)
- ▶ **07:00** Wash face, and get dressed.
- ▶ **07:30** Breakfast. Guild members manage seating order, so it's possible to talk with all sorts of people during meal. Vague feeling of tension?
- ▶ **08:30** Hunting and training. Form parties with guild members and test teamwork. For some reason, guilds that were hunting in the area leave. Tell guild members not to cause trouble for others.
- ▶ **12:00** Lunch. Sit around a bento box, picnic style. Not sure why, but there's an auction around self.
- ▶ **13:00** Help with Round Table Council duties at guild center. Guild members say it's okay to just sit there.
- ▶ **15:00** Town patrol. This is another Round Table Council guild duty.
- ▶ **18:00** Dinner. Thank companions for always fixing delicious food.
- ▶ **19:00** The guild bath is reserved exclusively for girls (although they say they'd like company), so firmly decline and go to outside bath. Sometimes borrow bath at Log Horizon.
- ▶ **20:00** Fill out guild journal.
- ▶ **20:45** Combat training in own room. The road to awakening to the mysteries is a hard one.
- ▶ **24:00** Take cold bath. Go to sleep.

6:00

12:00

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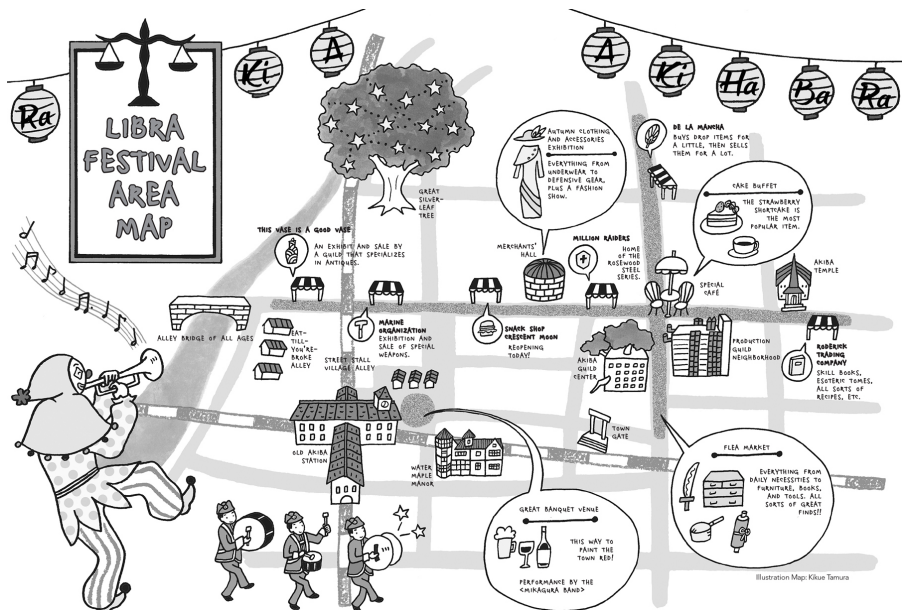


Illustration Map: Kikue Tamura

►ELDER TALES

A "WORD AND SORcery"—THEMED ONLINE GAME AND ONE OF THE LARGEST IN THE WORLD. AN INCORP FAVORED BY SERIOUS GAMERS, IT ROASTS A TWENTY-YEAR HISTORY.

►THE CATASTROPHE

A TERM FOR THE INCIDENT IN WHICH USERS WERE TRAPPED INSIDE THE ELDER TALES GAME WORLD. IT AFFECTED THE THIRTY THOUSAND JAPANESE USERS WHO WERE ONLINE WHEN HOMESTEADING THE NOODSPHERE, THE GAME'S TWELFTH EXPANSION PACK, WAS INTRODUCED.

►ADVENTURER

THE GENERAL TERM FOR A GAMER WHO IS PLAYING ELDER TALES. WHEN BEGINNING THE GAME, PLAYERS SELECT HEIGHT, CLASS, AND RACE FOR THESE IN-GAME DOUBLES. THE TERM IS MAINLY USED BY NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS TO REFER TO PLAYERS.

►PEOPLE OF THE EARTH

THE NAME NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS USE FOR THEMSELVES. THE CATASTROPHE DRAMATICALLY INCREASED THEIR NUMBERS FROM WHAT THEY WERE IN THE GAME. THEY NEED TO SLEEP AND EAT LIKE REGULAR PEOPLE, SO IT'S HARD TO TELL THEM APART FROM PLAYERS WITHOUT CHECKING THE STATUS SCREEN.

►THE HALF-GAIA PROJECT

A PROJECT TO CREATE A HALF-SIZED EARTH INSIDE ELDER TALES. ALTHOUGH IT'S NEARLY THE SAME SHAPE AS EARTH, THE DISTANCES ARE HALVED, AND IT HAS ONLY ONE-FOURTH THE AREA.

►AGE OF MYTH

A GENERAL TERM FOR THE ERA SAID TO HAVE BEEN DESTROYED IN THE OFFICIAL BACKSTORY OF THE ELDER TALES ONLINE GAME. IT WAS BASED ON THE CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION OF THE REAL WORLD. SUBWAYS AND BUILDINGS ARE THE RUINED RELICS OF THIS ERA.

►THE OLD WORLD

THE WORLD WHERE SHIROE AND THE OTHERS LIVED BEFORE ELDER TALES BECAME ANOTHER WORLD AND TRAPPED THEM. A TERM FOR EARTH, THE REAL WORLD, ETC.

►GUILDS

TEAMS COMPOSED OF MULTIPLE PLAYERS. MANY PLAYERS BELONG TO THEM, BOTH BECAUSE IT'S EASIER TO CONTACT AFFILIATED MEMBERS AND INVITE THEM ON ADVENTURES AND ALSO BECAUSE GUILDS PROVIDE CONVENIENT SERVICES (SUCH AS MAKING IT EASIER TO RECEIVE AND SEND ITEMS).

►THE ROUND TABLE COUNCIL

THE TOWN OF AKBABA'S SELF-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION, FORMED AT SHIROE'S PROPOSAL. COMPOSED OF ELEVEN GUILDS, INCLUDING MAJOR COMBAT AND PRODUCTION GUILDS AND GUILDS THAT COLLECTIVELY REPRESENT SMALL AND MODGE GUILDS, IT'S IN A POSITION TO LEAD THE REFORMATION IN AKBABA.

►LOG HORIZON

THE NAME OF THE GUILD SHIROE FORMED AFTER THE CATASTROPHE. ITS FOUNDING MEMBERS—AKATSUKI, NAOTSUGU, AND NYANTA—HAVE BEEN JOINED BY THE TWINS MINOR AND TOYUA. THEIR HEADQUARTERS IS IN A RUINED BUILDING PERCHED BY A GIANT ANCIENT TREE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF AKBABA.

►THE CRESCENT MOON LEAGUE

THE NAME OF THE GUILD MARIELLE LEADS. ITS PRIMARY PURPOSE IS TO SUPPORT MID-LEVEL PLAYERS. HENRIETTA, MARIELLE'S FRIEND SINCE THEIR DAYS AT A GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL, ACTS AS ITS ACCOUNTANT.

►THE DEBAUCHERY TEA PARTY

THE NAME OF A GROUP OF PLAYERS THAT SHIROE, NAOTSUGU, AND NYANTA BELONGED TO AT ONE TIME. IT WAS ACTIVE FOR ABOUT TWO YEARS, AND ALTHOUGH IT WASN'T A GUILD, IT'S STILL REMEMBERED IN ELDER TALES AS A LEGENDARY BAND OF PLAYERS.

►FAIRY RINGS

TRANSPORTATION DEVICES LOCATED IN FIELDS. THE DESTINATIONS ARE TIED TO THE PHASES OF THE MOON, AND IF PLAYERS USE THEM AT THE WRONG TIME, THERE'S NO TELLING WHERE THEY'LL END UP. AFTER THE CATASTROPHE, SINCE STRATEGY WEBSITES ARE INACCESSIBLE, ALMOST NO ONE USES THEM.

►ZONE

A UNIT THAT DESCRIBES RANGE AND AREA IN ELDER TALES. IN ADDITION TO FIELDS, DUNGEONS, AND TOWNS, THERE ARE ZONES AS SMALL AS SINGLE HOTEL ROOMS. DEPENDING ON THE PRICE, IT'S SOMETIMES POSSIBLE TO BUY THEM.

►THE LODESIA

THE NAME FOR THE GAME WORLD CREATED BY THE HALF-GAIA PROJECT. A WORD THAT'S EQUIVALENT TO "EARTH" IN THE REAL WORLD.

►SPECIAL SKILL

VARIOUS SKILLS USED BY ADVENTURERS. ACQUIRED BY LEVELING UP YOUR MAIN CLASS OR SUBCLASS, EVEN WITHIN THE SAME SKILL, THERE ARE FOUR RANGS—ELEMENTARY, INTERMEDIATE, ESOTERIC, AND SECRET—AND IT'S POSSIBLE TO NAME SKILLS GROW BY INCREASING YOUR PROFICIENCY.

►MAIN CLASS

THESE GOVERN COMBAT ABILITIES IN ELDER TALES, AND PLAYERS CHOOSE ONE WHEN BEGINNING THE GAME. THERE ARE TWELVE TYPES, THREE EACH IN FOUR CATEGORIES: WARRIOR, WEAPON ATTACK, RECOVERY, AND MAGIC ATTACK.

►SUBCLASS

ABILITIES THAT AREN'T DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN COMBAT BUT COME IN HANDY DURING GAME PLAY. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE ONLY TWELVE MAIN CLASSES, THERE ARE OVER FIFTY SUBCLASSES, AND THEY'RE A JUMBLED MIX OF EVERYTHING FROM CONVENIENT SKILL SETS TO JOKE ELEMENTS.

►THE TOWN OF AKIBA

ONE OF THE MAIN ADVENTURER TOWNS IN THE YAMATO REGION, IT'S BUILT ON THE SITE THAT AKHABARA OCCUPIES IN REAL-WORLD JAPAN.

►ARC-SHAPED ARCHIPELAGO YAMATO

THE WORLD OF THELDESIA IS DESIGNED BASED ON REAL-WORLD EARTH. THE ARC-SHAPED ARCHIPELAGO YAMATO IS THE REGION THAT MAPS TO JAPAN, AND IT'S DIVIDED INTO FIVE AREAS: THE EZZO EMPIRE, THE DUCHY OF FOURLAND, THE NINE-TAILS COMMONWEALTH, THE LEAGUE OF FREE CITIES, AND THE HOLY EMPIRE OF WESTLANDS.

►CAST TIME

THE PREPARATION TIME NEEDED WHEN USING A SPECIAL SKILL. THESE ARE SET FOR EACH SEPARATE SKILL, AND MORE POWERFUL SKILLS TEND TO HAVE LONGER CAST TIMES. WITH COMBAT-TYPE SPECIAL SKILLS, IT'S POSSIBLE TO MOVE DURING CAST TIME, BUT WITH MAGIC-BASED SKILLS, SPRINT MOVING INTERRUPTS CASTING.

►MOTION BIND

REFERS TO THE WAY YOUR BODY FREEZES UP AFTER YOU'VE USED A SPECIAL SKILL DURING MOTION BIND. ALL ACTIONS ARE IMPOSSIBLE, INCLUDING MOVEMENT.

►RECAST TIME

THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU HAVE TO WAIT AFTER YOU'VE USED A SPECIAL SKILL BEFORE YOU CAN USE IT AGAIN. THIS RESTRICTION MAKES IT VERY DIFFICULT TO USE A SPECIFIC SPECIAL SKILL SEVERAL TIMES IN A ROW. SOME SPECIAL SKILLS HAVE SUCH LONG RECAST TIMES THAT THEY CAN BE USED ONLY ONCE PER DAY.

►CALL OF HOME

A BASIC TYPE OF SPECIAL SKILL THAT ALL ADVENTURERS LEARN. IT INSTANTLY RETURNS YOU TO THE LAST SAFE AREA WITH A TEMPLE THAT YOU VISITED, BUT ONCE YOU USE IT, YOU CAN'T USE IT AGAIN FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

►RAID

THE TERM FOR A BATTLE FOUGHT WITH NUMBERS LARGER THAN THE NORMAL SIX-MEMBER PARTIES THAT ADVENTURERS USUALLY FORM. IT CAN ALSO BE USED TO REFER TO A UNIT MADE UP OF MANY PEOPLE. FAMOUS EXAMPLES INCLUDE TWENTY-FOUR-MEMBER FULL RAIDS AND NINETY-SIX-MEMBER LEGION RAIDS.

►RACE

THERE ARE A VARIETY OF HUMANOID RACES IN THE WORLD OF THELDESIA. ADVENTURERS MAY CHOOSE TO PLAY AS ONE OF EIGHT RACES: HUMAN, ELF, DWARF, HALF-ALF, FELINOID, WOLF-FANG, FOXTAIL, AND RITIAN. THESE ARE SOMETIMES CALLED BY THE GENERAL TERM, "THE GOOD HUMAN RACES."

►MAIN CLASSES

[WARRIOR CLASSES]		[WEAPON ATTACK CLASSES]		[RECOVERY CLASSES]		[MAGIC ATTACK CLASSES]	
	GUARDIAN GRANTS THE HIGHEST DEFENSE, ABLE TO ATTRACT ENEMIES WITH SHOUTS.		ASSASSIN A FOCUSED ATTACKER, SKILLED WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF WEAPONS.		CLERIC THE ULTIMATE HEALER, HAS THE GREATEST RECOVERY ABILITIES.		SORCERER SPECIALIZES IN DIRECTLY INFLECTING DAMAGE ON OPPONENTS.
	SAMURAI USES JAPANESE EQUIP. MENA AND TECHNIQUES WITH POWERFUL EFFECTS.		SWASHBUCKLER A VERSATILE, MOBILE FIGHTER, USES TWO SWORDS.		DRUID A MAGICAL RECOVERY CLASS, ALLED WITH NATURE AND THE SPIRITS.		SUMMONER SPECIALIZES IN SUMMONING AND CONTROLLING MYTHICAL BEASTS AND SPIRITS.
	MONK A BALANCED TYPE, SHORT ON REACTIONARY, BUT HAS FANTASTIC EVASIVE SKILLS.		BARD A BRIGHTLY EQUIPPED HARP-PLAYER, USES A WIDE RANGE OF "SONGS" WITH MAGICAL EFFECTS.		KANNAGI A PREVENTATIVE RECOVERY CLASS THAT BLOCKS DAMAGE.		ENCHANTER SPECIALIZES IN MANAGING ANOMALOUS STATUSES AND MP.

AFTERWORD

Hello for the first time in two months. This is Mamare Touno.

Thank you for buying *Log Horizon, Vol. 5: Sunday in Akiba*. This is the last *Log Horizon* of the year. Boy, was this a long year. Well, it's over now, anyway! ...As much as I'd love to say that, as far as the publishing industry's concerned, it's already 2012. Not only that, but it's spring.

Those of you who work may know what I'm talking about, but it's normal for the times when you make things and the times when those things appear in stores to be out of sync. For the people who've picked up this book, it's probably December already, but Touno's physical body is currently trapped in the October Country.

Little by little, the days are getting colder, the sunlight is getting more welcome, and I'm missing my blankets more and more. That's right: The season demands naps. They say "autumn is for eating" and "autumn is for sports," but for Touno, autumn is for sleeping. Even the most important one for writers—"autumn is for reading"—can't win out over naps.

Now then, as if having had my books outed to my family in Volume 4 was a load off my mind, I began living the NEET ("Not in Education, Employment, or Training") life at home. I was pretty much a NEET already, but now that I have books out, I'm a *professional* NEET. Authorized, company NEET (international first-class), married NEET (international second-class), and now professional NEET (domestic first-class, restrictions partially lifted).

NEET life means days as free and easy as Moominvalley. I thought it would be a blissful life where I got to write every single day, but I was unable to hold up under the pressure from all directions, and I'm being made to clean the house from top to bottom because this is "a good opportunity." Making a NEET do physical labor is a violation of

the International NEET Charter, you know. Of course, that “from all directions” euphemism was me being politically correct, and what I meant was “violent compulsion from Sister Touno.” *Cough, cough*

The rice cooker. *Kaboom*. The stove. *Kaboom*. The refrigerator. *Kaboom*.

...That was how that turned out, and we ended up getting rid of our household effects. It was more like moving house than a general housecleaning, or rather, more like fleeing in the night than moving house. If bald people are said to have neat and tidy hairstyles, then the Touno house is terribly neat and tidy. How did this happen?

Since we lost the refrigerator, Sister Touno’s ice cream stockpile was wiped out. We’re heading into winter, so there’s no need to stockpile ice cream, but Sister Touno is in high dudgeon. Until my sister started middle school, she thought that Häagen-Dazs was ice cream for grown-ups, so unless you had a license, you couldn’t eat it. ...Because that was what our mother taught her.

At our house, Lady Borden was treated as a substitute ice cream to pass the Häagen-Dazs age check. My most sincere apologies to Madame Lady Borden.

In terms of that sort of comparison, at my house, grated daikon with dried young sardines was considered a step below grated daikon with salmon roe. Even regarding the sardines, my mom told us anecdotes about “sinful mankind, who eats fish this tiny.” That’s an awfully awkward thing to hear during a meal. On top of that, we thought anchovies were baby smelt. Both of us, me and Sister Touno.

Now that I think about it, my mom was really mean.

The reason I can’t eat *natto* is because my mom told me, “Deep in the interior of Chiba, there’s a cultivation pool used to rot the beans, and lots of people have to do forced labor there.” Boy, was that a horrible story. A decade or so later, when I asked her about it, she laughed and said, “I was just messing with you, because you were a smart aleck.”

At the time, I really wondered whether I should do something about her, but come to think of it, I feed Sister Touno a lot of made-up trivia, too, so I’m guilty of the same crime. Blood will tell, I guess.

Just the other day, before I went out, I told her, “I have to go check on the final printing process; I’m going to the printing office to adjust the color of the ink. It’s a really important job for authors.” Sister Touno saw me off with an honest “Don’t cause trouble for people.” She can’t have imagined I was actually on my way to a *yakiniku* party. (Although she eventually found out, and I got punched.)

Due to these circumstances, I feel like asking my supervising

editor, Ms. F

THANKS FOR
ALL YOUR
HARD WORK.
HAPPY NEW

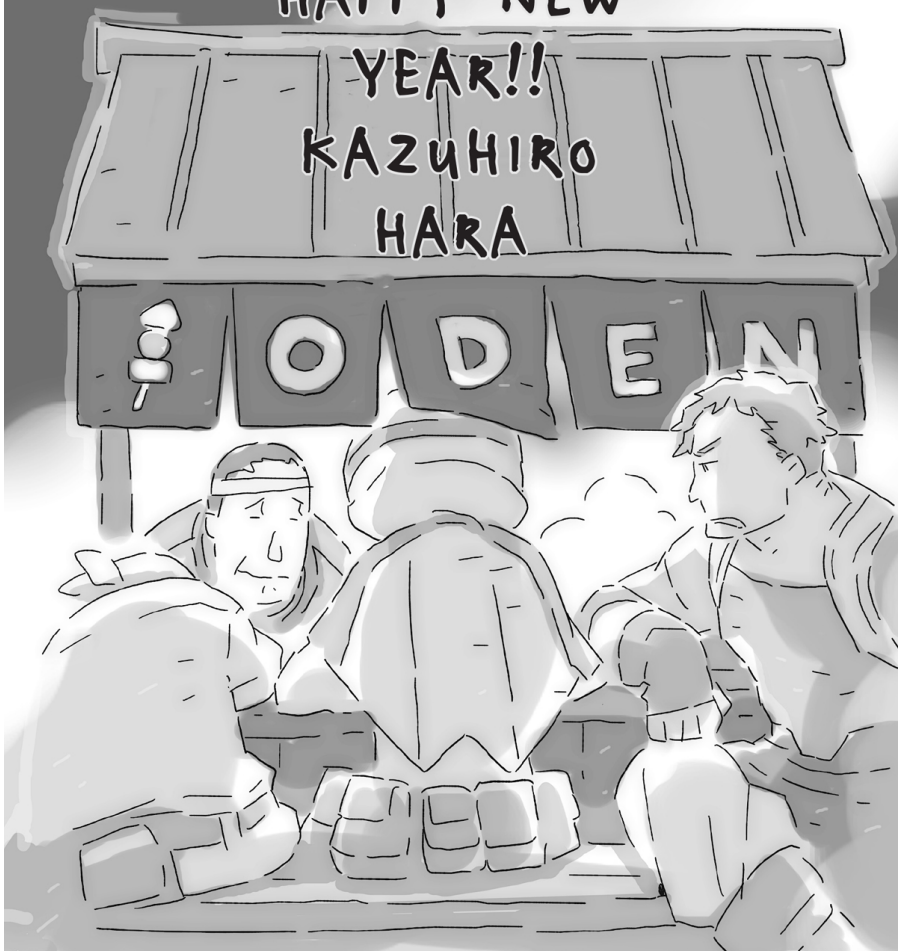
YEAR!!
KAZUHIRO
HARA



O

D

E





Inside Akatsuki, something clicked into place.

Lowering her body into a slight crouch, she stopped breathing for a moment. The image that rose into her mind with that stance acted as a trigger and activated a special skill. The Tracker's "Hide Shadow." Ordinarily, the special ability could be activated only from the command menu, but Akatsuki had added conditions to her martial arts and trained until she could activate it.

Almost as if her life force was draining away, the sense of presence evaporated from her black-clad body. Akatsuki was fading.

Even Akatsuki stopped knowing where she was. As the demon sword flew toward her, its attack stood out sharply in her fixed field of vision. Akatsuki was leaving herself open to an attack that would strike home. However, another Akatsuki was watching the scene from somewhere else. "Hide Shadow" had evolved to "Shadow Lurk," and the separated life force was moving straight across the battlefield.

Akatsuki ran through the murderer's attacks, which whipped up a freezing blizzard.

The shadow that looked like Akatsuki and Akatsuki's perspective were in two different places.

As proof, Akatsuki's shadow flickered and blinked, blurring as though the blizzard was erasing it. Like a phantom, it negated every attack.

In the midst of an overwhelming sense of acceleration, Akatsuki reached the murderer's back.

She wasn't able to hold this state for long periods.

The special skill was active for only a brief time, while Akatsuki stopped breathing and froze her heart. A skill that could take an ability ordinarily used for infiltration work or evading monsters' senses, and forcibly activate it during combat: This was the Mystery Akatsuki had acquired.

Pointless.

With the speed of a swallow in flight, Akatsuki swung her short sword.

The attack, which had come at the murderer suddenly from behind, left a shallow cut on his neck. To think that even when she'd launched an attack on a vital spot from that illusion, he'd been able to avoid a fatal wound. It brought home to her just how amazing the demon sword was. But...

Pointless.

There was no delight at having a wish fulfilled in Akatsuki's heart. She held her breath and activated Shadow Lurk again. The shadow double appeared immediately, and she used it as camouflage to leap out of the way of a triple thrust from the demon sword.

Evading the large pellets of ice that accompanied the thrusts, Akatsuki sped up even further, leaping onto the murderer's sword.

THIS IS
AS FAR
AS I'VE
WRITTEN
AS OF
NOVEMBER
8, 2011!!
MAMARE
TOUNO



MOUSEBONNET

NEWS FLASH!!



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FROM MANGA ARTIST

**KAZUHIRO
HARA!!**

► I'm constantly in Hara's debt, and now he's doing the manga. I bet you'll get to see all sorts of characters that haven't been drawn in the novels!
— Story: Mamare Touno

► If Hara says he'll draw the Log Horizon manga, I promise to back him up with everything I've got.
— Supervision: Shoji Masuda

► It feels like Hara's getting married and leaving us, but I think we'll have him come back home (to the novels) three times a year or so!
— Novel Supervising Editor: F——ta

I'll do my best
next year, too.

Kazuhiro Hara





ABOUT THE AUTHORS

AUTHOR: MAMARE TOUNO

A STRANGE LIFE-FORM THAT INHABITS THE TOKYO BOKUTOU SHITAMACHI AREA. IT'S BEEN TOSSING HALF-BAKED TEXT INTO A CORNER OF THE INTERNET SINCE THE YEAR 2000 OR SO. IT'S A FULLY AUTOMATIC, TEXT-LOVING MACRO THAT EATS AND DISCHARGES TEXT. IT DEBUTED AT THE END OF 2010 WITH *MAOYUU: MAOU YUUSHA (MAOYUU: DEMON KING AND HERO)*. *LOG HORIZON* IS A RESTRUCTURED VERSION OF A NOVEL THAT RAN ON THE WEBSITE *SHOUSETSUKA NI NAROU (SO YOU WANT TO BE A NOVELIST)*.

WEBSITE: [HTTP://WWW.MAMARE.NET](http://www.mamare.net)

SUPERVISION: SHOJI MASUDA

AS A GAME DESIGNER, HE'S WORKED ON *RINDA KYUUBU (RINDA CUBE)* AND *ORE NO SHIKABANE WO KOETE YUKE (STEP OVER MY DEAD BODY)*, AMONG OTHERS. ALSO ACTIVE AS A NOVELIST, HE'S RELEASED THE *ONIGIRI NUEKO (ONI KILLER NUEKO)* SERIES, THE *HARUKA* SERIES, *JOHN & MARY: FUTARI HA SHOUKIN KASEGI (JOHN & MARY: BOUNTY HUNTERS)*, *KIZUDARAKE NO BIINA (BEENA, COVERED IN WOUNDS)*, AND MORE. HIS LATEST EFFORT IS HIS FIRST CHILDREN'S BOOK, *TOUMEI NO NEKO TO TOSHI UE NO IMOUTO (THE TRANSPARENT CAT AND THE OLDER LITTLE SISTER)*. HE HAS ALSO WRITTEN *GEEMU DEZAIN NOU MASUDA SHINJI NO HASSOU TO WAZA (GAME DESIGN BRAIN: SHINJI MASUDA'S IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES)*.

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